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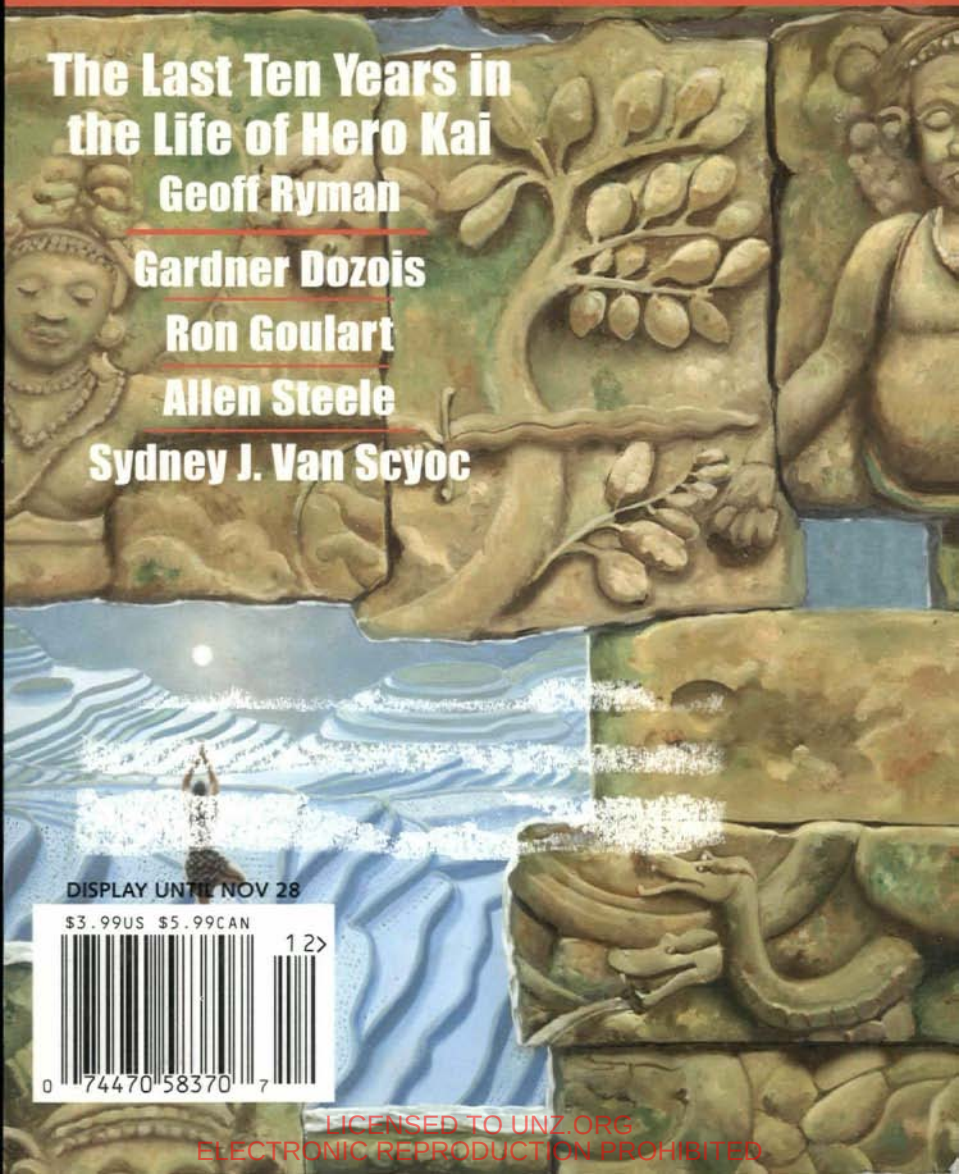

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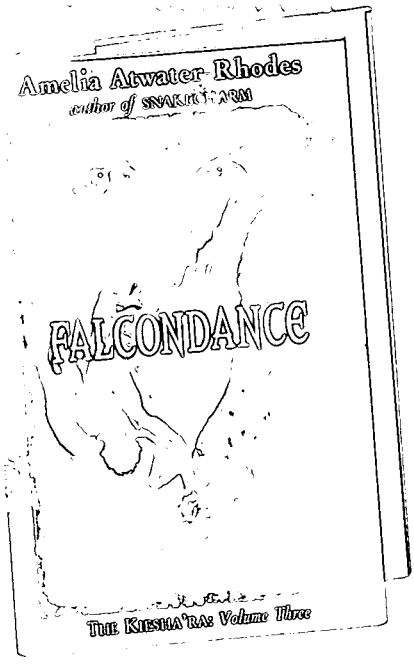

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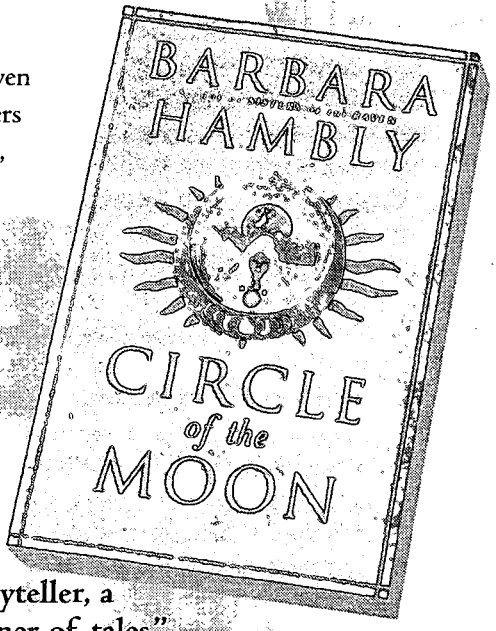

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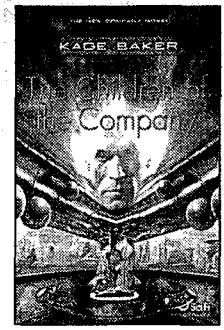

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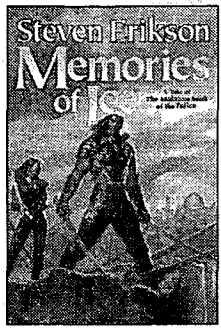

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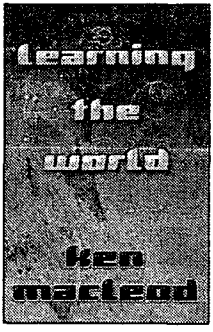

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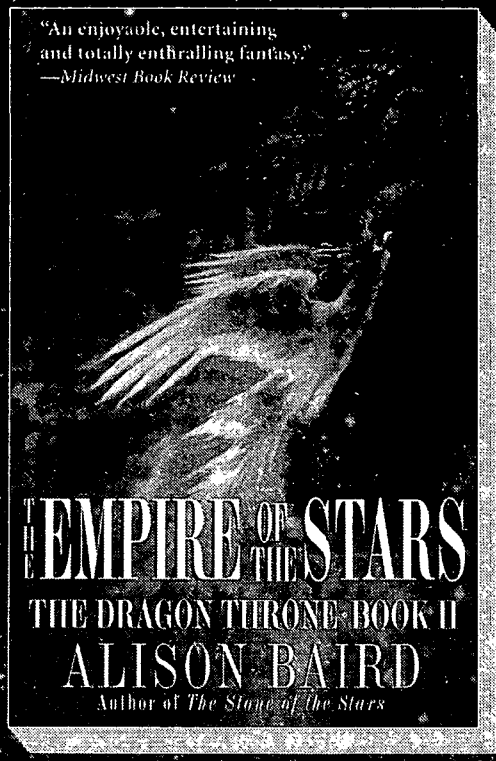
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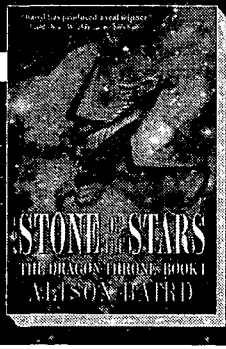

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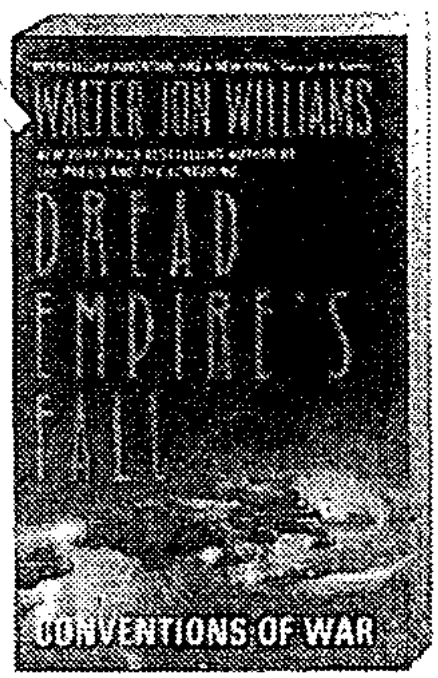
Conventions of War

Dread Empire's Fall



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Walpurgis Afternoon

By Delia Sherman

THE BIG THING ABOUT THE new people moving into the old Pratt place at Number 400 was that they got away with it at all. Our neighborhood is big on historical integrity. The newest house on the block was built in 1910, and you can't even change the paint-scheme on your house without recourse to preservation committee studies and zoning board hearings.

The old Pratt place had generated a tedious number of such hearings over the years — I'd even been to some of the more recent ones. Old Mrs. Pratt had let it go pretty much to seed, and when she passed away, there was trouble about clearing the title so it could be sold, and then it burned down.

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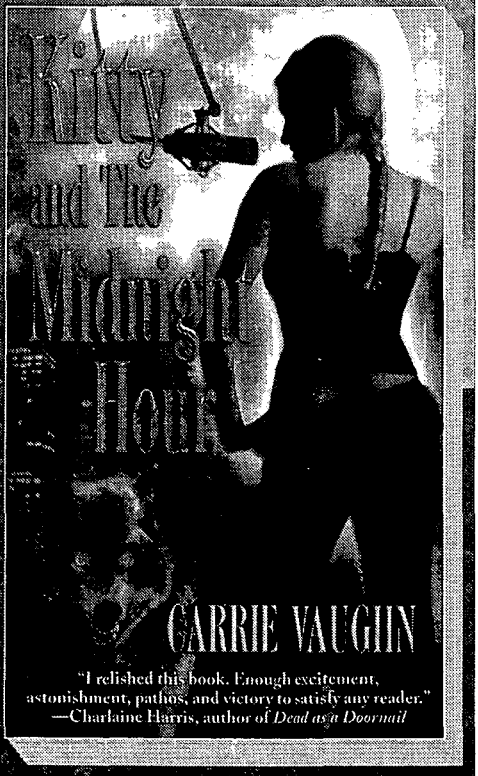
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an empty lot. The neighborhood kids played Bad Guys and Good Guys there after school and the neighborhood cats preyed on its endless supply of mice and voles. I'm not talking eyesore, here; just a big shady plot of land overgrown with bamboo, rhododendrons, wildly rambling roses, and some nice old trees, most notably an immensely ancient copper beech big enough to dwarf any normal-sized house.

It certainly dwarfs ours.

Last spring all that changed overnight. Literally. When Geoff and I turned in, we lived next door to an empty lot. When we got up, we didn't. I have to tell you, it came as quite a shock first thing on a Monday morning, and I wasn't even the one who discovered it. Geoff was.

Geoff's the designated keeper of the window because he insists on sleeping with it open and I hate getting up into a draft. Actually, I hate getting up, period. It's a blessing, really, that Geoff can't boil water without burning it, or I'd never be up before ten. As it is, I eke out every second of warm unconsciousness I can while Geoff shuffles across the floor and thunks down the sash and takes his shower. On that particular morning, his shuffle ended not with a thunk, but with a gasp.

"Holy shit," he said.

I sat up in bed and groped for my robe. When we were in grad school, Geoff had quite a mouth on him, but fatherhood and two decades of college teaching have toned him down a lot. These days, he usually keeps his swearing for Supreme Court decisions and departmental politics.

"Get up, Evie. You gotta see this."

So I got up and went to the window, and there it was, big as life and twice as natural, a real *Victorian Homes* centerfold, set back from the street and just the right size to balance the copper beech. Red tile roof, golden brown clapboards, miles of scarlet-and-gold gingerbread draped over dozens of eaves, balconies, and dormers. A witch's hat tower, a wrap-around porch, and a massive carriage house. With a cupola on it. Nothing succeeds like excess, I always say.

"Holy shit."

"Watch your mouth, Evie," said Geoff automatically.

I like to think of myself as a fairly sensible woman. I don't imagine things, I face facts, I hadn't gotten hysterical when my fourteen-year-old daughter asked me about birth control. Surely there was some perfectly

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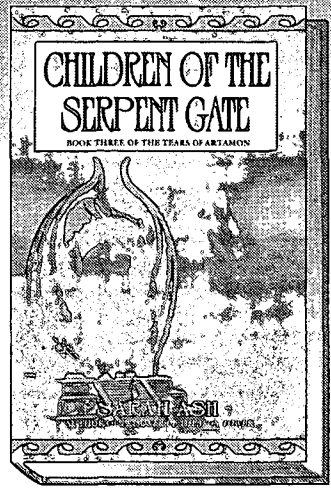

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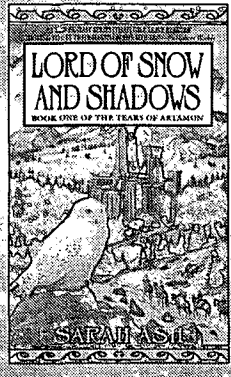

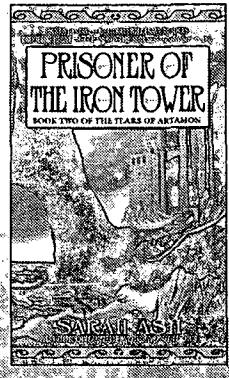

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rational explanation for this phenomenon. All I had to do was think of it.

"It's an hallucination," I said. "Victorian houses don't go up overnight. People do have hallucinations. We're having an hallucination. Q.E.D."

"It's not a hallucination," Geoff said.

Geoff teaches intellectual history at the University and tends to disagree, on principle, with everything everyone says. Someone says the sky is blue, he says it isn't. And then he explains why. "This has none of the earmarks of a hallucination," he went on. "We aren't in a heightened emotional state, not expecting a miracle, not drugged, not part of a mob, not starving, not sense-deprived. Besides, there's a clothesline in the yard with laundry hanging on it. Nobody hallucinates long underwear."

I looked where he was pointing, and sure enough, a pair of scarlet long johns was kicking and waving from an umbrella-shaped drying-rack, along with a couple pairs of women's panties, two oxford-cloth shirts hung up by their collars, and a gold-and-black print caftan. There was also what was arguably the most beautifully designed perennial bed I'd ever seen basking in the early morning sun. As I was squinting at the delphiniums, a side door opened and a woman came out with a wicker clothes basket propped on her hip. She was wearing shorts and a T-shirt, had fairish hair pulled back in a bushy tail, and struck me as being a little long in the tooth to be going barefoot and braless.

"Nice legs," said Geoff.

I snapped down the window. "Pull the shades before you get in the shower," I said. "It looks to me like our new neighbors get a nice, clear shot of our bathroom from their third floor."

In our neighborhood, we pride ourselves on minding our own business and not each others' — live and let live, as long as you keep your dog, your kids, and your lawn under control. If you don't, someone calls you or drops you a note, and if that doesn't make you straighten up and fly right, well, you're likely to get a call from the town council about that extension you neglected to get a variance for. Needless to say, the house at Number 400 fell way outside all our usual coping mechanisms. If some contractor had shown up at dawn with bulldozers and two-by-fours, I could have called

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the police or our councilwoman or someone and got an injunction. How do you get an injunction against a physical impossibility?

The first phone call came at about eight-thirty: Susan Morrison, whose back yard abuts the Pratt place.

"Reality check time," said Susan. "Do we have new neighbors or do we not?"

"Looks like it to me," I said.

Silence. Then she sighed. "Yeah. So. Can Kimmy sit for Jason Friday night?"

Typical. If you can't deal with it, pretend it doesn't exist, like when one couple down the street got the bright idea of turning their front lawn into a wildflower meadow. The trouble is, a Victorian mansion is a lot harder to ignore than even the wildest meadow. The phone rang all morning with hysterical calls from women who hadn't spoken to us since Geoff's brief tenure as president of the neighborhood association.

After several fruitless sessions of what's-the-world-coming-to, I turned on the machine and went out to the garden to put in the beans. Planting them in May was pushing it, but I needed the therapy. For me, gardening's the most soothing activity on Earth. When you plant a bean, you get a bean, not an azalea or a cabbage. When you see that bean covered with icky little orange things, you know they're Mexican bean beetle larvae and go for the pyrethrum. Or you do if you're paying attention. It always astonishes me how oblivious even the garden club ladies can be to a plant's needs and preferences.

Sure, there are nasty surprises, like the winter that the mice ate all the Apricot Beauty tulip bulbs. But mostly you know where you are with a garden. If you put the work in, you'll get satisfaction out, which is more than can be said of marriages or careers.

This time though, digging and raking and planting failed to work their usual magic. Every time I glanced up, there was Number 400, serene and comfortable, the shrubs established and the paint chipping just a little around the windows, exactly as if it had been there forever instead of less than twelve hours.

I'm not big on the inexplicable. Fantasy makes me nervous. In fact, fiction makes me nervous. I like facts and plenty of them. That's why I wanted to be a botanist. I wanted to know everything there was to know

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about how plants worked, why azaleas like acid soil and peonies like wood ash and how you might be able to get them to grow next to each other. I even went to graduate school and took organic chemistry. Then I met Geoff, fell in love, and traded in my Ph.D. for an M-R-S, with a minor in Mommy. None of these events (except possibly falling in love with Geoff) fundamentally shook my allegiance to provable, palpable facts. The house next door was palpable, all right, but it shouldn't have been. By the time Kim got home from school that afternoon, I had a headache from trying to figure out how it got to be there.

Kim is my daughter. She reads fantasy, likes animals a lot more than she likes people, and is a big fan of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Because of Kim, we have two dogs (Spike and Willow), a cockatiel (Frodo), and a lop-eared Belgian rabbit (Big Bad), plus the overflow of semi-wild cats (Balin, Dwalin, Bifur, and Bombur) from the Pratt place, all of which she feeds and looks after with truly astonishing dedication.

Three-thirty on the nose, the screen door slammed and Kim careened into the kitchen with Spike and Willow bouncing ecstatically around her feet.

"Whaddya think of the new house, Mom? Who do you think lives there? Do they have pets?"

I laid out her after-school sliced apple and cheese and answered the question I could answer. "There's at least one woman — she was hanging out laundry this morning. No sign of children or pets, but it's early days yet."

"Isn't it just the coolest thing in the universe, Mom? Real magic, right next door. Just like *Buffy*."

"Without the vampires, I hope. Kim, there's no such thing as magic. There's probably a perfectly simple explanation."

"But, *Mom!*"

"But nothing. You need to call Mrs. Morrison. She wants to know if you can sit for Jason on Friday night. And Big Bad's looking shaggy. He needs to be brushed."

That was Monday.

Tuesday morning, our street looked like the Expressway at rush hour. It's a miracle there wasn't an accident. Everybody in town must have driven by, slowing down as they passed Number 400 and craning out the

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car window. Things quieted down in the middle of the day when everyone was at work, but come 4:30 or so, the joggers started and the walkers and more cars. About 6:00, the police pulled up in front of the house, at which point everyone stopped pretending to be nonchalant and held their breath. Two cops disappeared into the house, came out again a few minutes later, and left without talking to anybody. They were holding cookies and looking bewildered.

The traffic let up on Wednesday. Kim found a kitten (Hermione) in the wildflower garden and Geoff came home full of the latest in a series of personality conflicts with his department head, which gave everyone something other than Number 400 to talk about over dinner.

Thursday, Lucille Flint baked one of her coffee cakes and went over to do the Welcome Wagon thing.

Lucille's our local Good Neighbor. Someone moves in, has a baby, marries, dies, and there's Lucille, Johnny-on-the-spot with a coffee cake in her hands and the proper Hallmark sentiment on her lips. Lucille has the time for this kind of thing because she doesn't have a regular job. All right, neither do I, but I write a gardener's advice column for the local paper, so I'm not exactly idle. There's the garden, too. Besides, I'm not the kind of person who likes sitting around in other people's kitchens drinking watery instant and hearing the stories of their lives. Lucille is.

Anyway. Thursday morning, I researched the diseases of roses for my column. I'm lucky with roses. Mine never come down with black spot, and the Japanese beetles prefer Susan Morrison's yard to mine. Weeds, however, are not so obliging. When I'd finished Googling "powdery mildew," I went out to tackle the rosebed.

Usually, I don't mind weeding. My mind wanders, my hands get dirty. I can almost feel my plants settling deeper into the soil as I root out the competition. But my rosebed is on the property line between us and the Pratt place. What if the house disappeared again, or someone came out and wanted to chat? I'm not big into chatting. On the other hand, there was shepherd's purse in the rosebed, and shepherd's purse can be a real wild Indian once you let it get established, so I gritted my teeth, grabbed my Cape Cod weeder, and got down to it.

Just as I was starting to relax, I heard footsteps passing on the walk and pushed the rose canes aside just in time to see Lucille Flint climbing the

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stone steps to Number 400. I watched her ring the doorbell, but I didn't see who answered because I ducked down behind a bushy Gloire de Dijon. If Lucille doesn't care who knows she's a busybody, that's her business.

After twenty-five minutes, I'd weeded and cultivated those roses to a fare-thee-well, and was backing out when I heard the screen door, followed by Lucille telling someone how *lovely* their home was, and thanks again for the *scrumptious* pie.

I caught her up under the copper beech.

"Evie dear, you're all out of breath," she said. "My, that's a nasty tear in your shirt. "

"Come in, Lucille," I said. "Have a cup of coffee."

She followed me inside without comment, and accepted a cup of microwaved coffee and a slice of date-and-nut cake.

She took a bite, coughed a little, and grabbed for the coffee.

"It is pretty awful, isn't it?" I said apologetically. "I baked it last week for some PTA thing at Kim's school and forgot to take it."

"Never mind. I'm full of cherry pie from next door. " She leaned over the stale cake and lowered her voice. "The cherries were *fresh*, Evie."

My mouth dropped open. "Fresh cherries? In May? You're kidding."

Lucille nodded, satisfied at my reaction. "Nope. There was a bowl of them on the table, leaves and all. What's more, there was corn on the draining-board. Fresh corn. In the husk. With the silk still on it."

"No!"

"Yes." Lucille sat back and took another sip of coffee. "Mind you, there could be a perfectly ordinary explanation. Ophelia's a horticulturist, after all. Maybe she's got greenhouses out back. Heaven knows there's enough room for several."

I shook my head. "I've never heard of corn growing in a greenhouse."

"And I've never heard of a house appearing in an empty lot overnight," Lucille said tartly. "About that, there's nothing I can tell you. They're not exactly forthcoming, if you know what I mean."

I was impressed. I knew how hard it was to avoid answering Lucille's questions, even about the most personal things. She just kind of picked at you, in the nicest possible way, until you unraveled. It's one of the reasons I didn't hang out with her much.

"So, who are they?"

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"Rachel Abrams and Ophelia Canderel. I think they're lesbians. They feel like family together, and you can take it from me, they're not sisters."

Fine. We're a liberal suburb, we can cope with lesbians. "Children?"

Lucille shrugged. "I don't know. There were drawings on the fridge, but no toys."

"Inconclusive evidence," I agreed. "What did you talk about?"

She made a face. "Pie crust. The Perkins's wildflower meadow. They like it. Burney." Burney was Lucille's husband, an unpleasant old fart who disapproved of everything in the world except his equally unpleasant terrier, Homer. "Electricians. They want a fixture put up in the front hall. Then Rachel tried to tell me about her work in artificial intelligence, but I couldn't understand a word she said."

From where I was sitting, I had an excellent view of Number 400's wisteria-covered carriage house with its double doors ajar on an awe-inspiring array of garden tackle. "Artificial intelligence must pay well," I said.

Lucille shrugged. "There has to be family money somewhere. You ought to see the front hall, not to mention the kitchen. It looks like something out of a magazine."

"What are they doing here?"

"That's the forty-thousand-dollar question, isn't it?"

We drained the cold dregs of our coffee, contemplating the mystery of why a horticulturist and an artificial intelligence wonk would choose our quiet, tree-lined suburb to park their house in. It seemed a more solvable mystery than how they'd transported it there in the first place.

Lucille took off to make Burney his noontime franks and beans and I tried to get my column roughed out. But I couldn't settle to my computer, not with that Victorian enigma sitting on the other side of my rose bed. Every once in a while, I'd see a shadow passing behind a window or hear a door bang. I gave up trying to make the disposal of diseased foliage interesting and went out to poke around in the garden. I was elbow-deep in the viburnum, pruning out deadwood, when I heard someone calling.

It was a woman, standing on the other side of my roses. She was big, solidly curved, and dressed in bright flowered overalls. Her hair was braided with shiny gold ribbon into dozens of tiny plaits tied off with little

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metal beads. Her skin was a deep matte brown, like antique mahogany. Despite the overalls, she was astonishingly beautiful.

I dropped the pruning shears. "Damn," I said. "Sorry," I said. "You surprised me." I felt my cheeks heat. The woman smiled at me serenely and beckoned.

I don't like new people and I don't like being put on the spot, but I've got my pride. I picked up my pruning shears, untangled myself from the viburnum, and marched across the lawn to met my new neighbor.

She said her name was Ophelia Canderel, and she'd been admiring my garden. Would I like to see hers?

I certainly would.

If I'd met Ophelia at a party, I'd have been totally tongue-tied. She was beautiful, she was big, and frankly, there just aren't enough people of color in our neighborhood for me to have gotten over my Liberal nervousness around them. This particular woman of color, however, spoke fluent Universal Gardener and her garden was a gardener's garden, full of horticultural experiments and puzzles and stuff to talk about. Within about three minutes, she was asking my advice about the gnarly brown larvae infesting her bee balm, and I was filling her in on the peculiarities of our local microclimate. By the time we'd inspected every flower and shrub in the front yard, I was more comfortable with her than I was with the local garden club ladies. We were alike, Ophelia and I.

We were discussing the care and feeding of peonies in an acid soil when Ophelia said, "Would you like to see my shrubbery?"

Usually when I hear the word "shrubbery," I think of a semi-formal arrangement of rhodies and azaleas, lilacs and viburnum, with a potentilla perhaps, or a butterfly bush for late summer color. The bed should be deep enough to give everything room to spread and there should be a statue in it, or maybe a sundial. Neat, but not anal — that's what you should aim for in a shrubbery.

Ophelia sure had the not-anal part down pat. The shrubs didn't merely spread, they rioted. And what with the trees and the orchids and the ferns and the vines, I couldn't begin to judge the border's depth. The hibiscus and the bamboo were okay, although I wouldn't have risked them myself. But to plant bougainvillea and poinsettias, coconut palms and frangipani this far north was simply tempting fate. And the statue! I'd

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never seen anything remotely like it, not outside of a museum, anyway. No head to speak of, breasts like footballs, a belly like a watermelon, and a phallus like an overgrown zucchini, the whole thing weathered with the rains of a thousand years or more.

I glanced at Ophelia. "Impressive," I said.

She turned a critical eye on it. "You don't think it's too much? Rachel says it is, but she's a minimalist. This is my little bit of home, and I love it."

"It's a lot," I admitted. Accuracy prompted me to add, "It suits you."

I still didn't understand how Ophelia had gotten a tropical rainforest to flourish in a temperate climate.

I was trying to find a nice way to ask her about it when she said, "You're a real find, Evie. Rachel's working, or I'd call her to come down. She really wants to meet you."

"Next time," I said, wondering what on Earth I'd find to talk about with a specialist on artificial intelligence. "Um. Does Rachel garden?"

Ophelia laughed. "No way — her talent is not for living things. But I made a garden for her. Would you like to see it?"

I was only dying to, although I couldn't help wondering what kind of exotica I was letting myself in for. A desertscape? Tundra? Curiosity won. "Sure," I said. "Lead on."

We stopped on the way to visit the vegetable garden. It looked fairly ordinary, although the tomatoes were more August than May, and the beans more late June. I didn't see any corn and I didn't see any greenhouses. After a brief side-bar on insecticidal soaps, Ophelia led me behind the carriage house. The unmistakable sound of quacking fell on my ears.

"We aren't zoned for ducks," I said, startled.

"We are," said Ophelia. "Now. How do you like Rachel's garden?"

A prospect of brown reeds with a silvery river meandering through it stretched through where the Morrison's back yard ought to be, all the way to a boundless expanse of ocean. In the marsh it was April, with a crisp salt wind blowing back from the water and ruffling the brown reeds and the white-flowering shad and the pale green unfurling sweetfern. Mallards splashed and dabbled along the meander. A solitary great egret stood among the reeds, the fringes of its white courting shawl blowing around one black and knobbly leg. As I watched, open-mouthed, the egret

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unfurled its other leg from its breast feathers, trod at the reeds, and lowered its golden bill to feed.

I got home late. Kim was in the basement with the animals, and the chicken I was planning to make for dinner was still in the freezer. Thanking heaven for modern technology, I defrosted the chicken in the microwave, chopped veggies, seasoned, mixed, and got the whole mess in the oven just as Geoff walked in the door. He wasn't happy about eating forty-five minutes late, but he was mostly over it by bedtime.

That was Thursday.

Friday, I saw Ophelia and Rachel pulling out of their driveway in one of those old cars that has huge fenders and a running board. They returned after lunch, the back seat full of groceries. They and the groceries disappeared through the kitchen door, and there was no further sign of them until late afternoon, when Rachel opened one of the quarter-round windows in the attic and energetically shook the dust out of a small, patterned carpet.

On Saturday, the invitation came.

It stood out among the flyers, book orders, bills, and requests for money that usually came through our mail-slot, a five-by-eight silvery-blue envelope that smelled faintly of sandalwood. It was addressed to The Gordon Family in a precise italic hand.

I opened it and read:

Rachel Esther Abrams and Ophelia Desirée Candarel
Request the Honor of your Presence
At the
Celebration of their Marriage.
Sunday, May 24 at 3 P.M.
There will be refreshments before and after the Ceremony.

I was still staring at it when the doorbell rang. It was Lucille, looking fit to burst, holding an invitation just like mine.

"Come in, Lucille. There's plenty of coffee left."

I don't think I'd ever seen Lucille in such a state. You'd think someone had invited her to parade naked down Main Street at noon.

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"Well, write and tell them you can't come," I said. "They're just being neighborly, for Pete's sake. It's not like they can't get married if you're not there."

"I know. It's just.... It puts me in a funny position, that's all. Burney's a founding member of Normal Marriage for Normal People. He wouldn't like it at all if he knew I'd been invited to a lesbian wedding."

"So don't tell him. If you want to go, just tell him the new neighbors have invited you to an open house on Sunday, and you know for a fact that we're going to be there."

Lucille smiled. Burney hated Geoff almost as much as Geoff hated Burney. "It's a thought," she said. "Are you going?"

"I don't see why not. Who knows? I might learn something."

THE SUNDAY of the wedding, I took forever to dress. Kim thought it was funny, but Geoff threatened to bail if I didn't quit fussing. "It's a lesbian wedding, for pity's sake. It's going to be full of middle-aged dykes with ugly haircuts. Nobody's going to care what you look like."

"I care," said Kim. "And I think that jacket is wicked cool."

I'd bought the jacket at a little Indian store in the Square and not worn it since. When I got it away from the Square's atmosphere of collegiate funk it looked, I don't know, too Sixties, too artsy, too bright for a fortysomething suburban matron. It was basically purple, with teal blue and gold and fuchsia flowers all over it and brass buttons shaped like parrots. Shaking my head, I started to unfasten the parrots.

Geoff exploded. "I swear to God, Evie, if you change again, that's it. It's not like I want to go. I've got papers to correct; I don't have time for this" — he glanced at Kim — "nonsense. Either we go or we stay. But we do it now."

Kim touched my arm. "It's *you*, Mom. Come *on*."

So I came on, my jacket flashing neon in the sunlight. By the time we hit the sidewalk, I felt like a tropical floral display; I was ready to bolt home and hide under the bed.

"Great," said Geoff. "Not a car in sight. If we're the only ones here, I'm leaving."

"I don't think that's going to be a problem," I said.

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Beyond the copper beech, I saw a colorful crowd milling around as purposefully as bees, bearing chairs and flowers and ribbons. As we came closer, it became clear that Geoff couldn't have been more wrong about the wedding guests. There wasn't an ugly haircut in sight, although there were some pretty startling dye-jobs. The dress-code could best be described as eclectic, with a slight bias toward floating fabrics and rich, bright colors. My jacket felt right at home.

Geoff was muttering about not knowing anybody when Lucille appeared, looking festive in Laura Ashley chintz.

"Isn't this fun?" she said, with every sign of sincerity. "I've never met such interesting people. And friendly! They make me feel right at home. Come over here and join the gang."

She dragged us toward the long side-yard, which sloped down to a lavishly blooming double-flowering cherry underplanted with peonies. Which shouldn't have been in bloom at the same time as the cherry, but I was getting used to the vagaries of Ophelia's garden. A willowy young person in chartreuse lace claimed Lucille's attention, and they went off together. The three of us stood in a slightly awkward knot at the edge of the crowd, which occasionally threw out a few guests who eddied around us briefly before retreating.

"How are those spells of yours, dear? Any better?" inquired a solicitous voice in my ear, and, "Oh!" when I jumped. "You're not Elvira, are you? Sorry."

Geoff's grip was cutting off the circulation above my elbow. "This was not one of your better ideas, Evie. We're surrounded by weirdoes. Did you see that guy in the skirt? I think we should take Kimmy home."

A tall black man with a flattop and a diamond in his left ear appeared, pried Geoff's hand from my arm, and shook it warmly. "Dr. Gordon? Ophelia told me to be looking out for you. I've read *The Anarchists*, you see, and I can't tell you how much I admired it."

Geoff actually blushed. Before the subject got too painful to talk about, he used to say that for a history of anarchism, his one book had had a remarkably elite readership: three members of the tenure review committee, two reviewers for scholarly journals, and his wife. "Thanks," he said.

Geoff's fan grinned, clearly delighted. "Maybe we can talk at the

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reception," he said. "Right now, I need to find you a place to sit. They look like they're just about ready to roll."

It was a lovely wedding.

I don't know exactly what I was expecting, but I was mildly surprised to see a rabbi and a wedding canopy. Ophelia was an enormous rose in crimson draperies. Rachel was a calla lily in cream linen. Their heads were tastefully wreathed in oak and ivy leaves. There were the usual prayers and promises and tears; when the rabbi pronounced them married, they kissed and horns sounded a triumphant fanfare.

Kim poked me in the side. "Mom? Who's playing those horns?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's a recording."

"I don't think so," Kim said. "I think it's the tree. Isn't this just about the coolest thing ever?"

We were on our feet again. The chairs had disappeared and people were dancing. A cheerful bearded man grabbed Kim's hand to pull her into the line. Geoff grabbed her and pulled her back.

"*Dad!*" Kim wailed. "I want to dance!"

"I've got a pile of papers to correct before class tomorrow," Geoff said. "And if I know you, there's some homework you've put off until tonight. We have to go home now."

"We can't leave yet," I objected. "We haven't congratulated the brides."

Geoff's jaw tensed. "So go congratulate them," he said. "Kim and I will wait for you here."

Kim looked mutinous. I gave her the eye. This wasn't the time or the place to object. Like Geoff, Kim had no inhibitions about airing the family linen in public, but I had enough for all three of us.

"Dr. Gordon. There you are." *The Anarchists* fan popped up between us. "I've been looking all over for you. Come have a drink and let me tell you how brilliant you are."

Geoff smiled modestly. "You're being way too generous," he said. "Did you read Peterson's piece in *The Review*?"

"Asshole," said the man dismissively. Geoff slapped him on the back, and a minute later, they were halfway to the house, laughing as if they'd known each other for years. Thank heaven for the male ego.

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"Dance?" said Kim.

"Go for it," I said. "I'm going to get some champagne and kiss the brides."

The brides were nowhere to be found. The champagne, a young girl informed me, was in the kitchen. So I entered Number 400 for the first time, coming through the mudroom into a large, oak-paneled hall. To my left a staircase with an ornately carved oak banister rose to an art-glass window. Ahead was a semicircular fireplace with a carved bench on one side and a door that probably led to the kitchen on the other. Between me and the door was an assortment of brightly dressed strangers, talking and laughing.

I edged around them, passing two curtained doors and a bronze statue of Alice and the Red Queen. Puzzle fragments of conversation rose out of the general buzz:

"My pearls? Thank you, my dear, but you know they're only stimulated."

"And *then* it just went 'poof'! A perfectly good frog, and it just went poof!"

"...and then Tallulah says to the bishop, she says, 'Love your drag, darling, but your *purse* is on fire.' Don't you love it? 'Your *purse* is on fire!'"

The kitchen itself was blessedly empty except for a stout gentleman in a tuxedo, and a striking woman in a peach silk pantsuit, who was tending an array of champagne bottles and a cut-glass bowl full of bright blue punch. Curious, I picked up a cup of punch and sniffed at it. The woman smiled up at me through a caterpillery fringe of false lashes.

"Pure witch's brew," she said in one of those Lauren Bacall come-hither voices I've always envied. "But what can you do? It's the *specialité de la maison*."

The tuxedoed man laughed. "Don't mind Silver, Mrs. Gordon. He just likes to tease. Ophelia's punch is wonderful."

"Only if you like Ty-dee Bowl," said Silver, tipping a sapphire stream into another cup. "You know, honey, you shouldn't stand around with your mouth open like that. Think of the flies."

Several guests entered in plenty of time to catch this exchange. Determined to preserve my cool, I took a gulp of the punch. It tasted fruity

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and made my mouth prickle, and then it hit my stomach like a firecracker. So much for cool. I choked and gasped.

"I tried to warn you," Silver said. "You'd better switch to champagne." Now I knew Silver was a man, I could see that his hands and wrists were big for the rest of her — him. I could feel my face burning with punch and mortification.

"No, thank you," I said faintly. "Maybe some water?"

The stout man handed me a glass. I sipped gratefully. "You're Ophelia and Rachel's neighbor, aren't you?" he said. "Lovely garden. You must be proud of that asparagus bed."

"I was, until I saw Ophelia's."

"Ooh, listen to the green-eyed monster," Silver cooed. "Don't be jealous, honey. Ophelia's the best. Nobody understands plants like Ophelia."

"I'm not jealous," I said with dignity. "I'm wistful. There's a difference."

Then, just when I thought it couldn't possibly get any worse, Geoff appeared, looking stunningly unprofessorial, with one side of his shirt collar turned up and his dark hair flopped over his eyes.

"Hey, Evie. Who knew a couple of dykes would know how to throw a wedding?"

You'd think after sixteen years of living with Geoff, I'd know whether or not he was an alcoholic. But I don't. He doesn't go on binges, he doesn't get drunk at every party we go to, and I'm pretty sure he doesn't drink on the sly. What I do know is that drinking doesn't make him more fun to be around.

I took his arm. "I'm glad you're enjoying yourself," I said brightly. "Too bad we have to leave."

"Leave? Who said anything about leaving? We just got here."

"Your papers," I said. "Remember?"

"Screw my papers," said Geoff and held out his empty cup to Silver. "This punch is dy-no-mite."

"What about your students?"

"I'll tell 'em I didn't feel like reading their stupid essays. That'll fix their little red wagons. Boring as hell anyway. Fill 'er up, beautiful," he told Silver.

Silver considered him gravely. "Geoff, darling," he said. "A little bird

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tells me that there's an absolutely delicious argument going on in the smoking room. They'll never forgive you if you don't come play."

Geoff favored Silver with a leer that made me wish I were somewhere else. "Only if you play too," he said. "What's it about?"

Silver waved a pink-tipped hand. "Something about theoretical versus practical anarchy. Right, Rodney?"

"I believe so," said the stout gentleman agreeably.

A martial gleam rose in Geoff's eye. "Let me at 'em."

Silver's pale eyes turned to me, solemn and concerned. "You don't mind, do you, honey?"

I shrugged. With luck, the smoking-room crowd would be drunk too, and nobody would remember who said what. I just hoped none of the anarchists had a violent temper.

"We'll return him intact," Silver said. "I promise." And they were gone, Silver trailing fragrantly from Geoff's arm.

While I was wondering whether I'd said that thing about the anarchists or only thought it, I felt a tap on my shoulder — the stout gentleman, Rodney.

"Mrs. Gordon, Rachel and Ophelia would like to see you and young Kimberly in the study. If you'll please step this way?"

His manner had shifted from wedding guest to old-fashioned butler. Properly intimidated, I trailed him to the front hall. It was empty now, except for Lucille and the young person in chartreuse lace, who were huddled together on the bench by the fireplace. The young person was talking earnestly and Lucille was listening and nodding and sipping punch. Neither of them paid any attention to us or to the music coming from behind one of the curtained doors. I saw Kim at the foot of the stairs, examining the newel post.

It was well worth examining: a screaming griffin with every feather and every curl beautifully articulated and its head polished smooth and black as ebony. Rodney gave it a brief, seemingly unconscious caress as he started up the steps. When Kim followed suit, I thought I saw the carved eye blink.

I must have made a noise, because Rodney halted his slow ascent and gazed down at me, standing open-mouthed below. "Lovely piece of work, isn't it? We call it the house guardian. A joke, of course."

"Of course," I echoed. "Cute."

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* * *

It seemed to me that the house had more rooms than it ought to. Through open doors, I glimpsed libraries, salons, parlors, bedrooms. We passed through a stone cloister where discouraged-looking ficuses in tubs shed their leaves on the cracked pavement and into a green-scummed pool. I don't know what shocked me more: the cloister or the state of its plants. Maybe Ophelia's green thumb didn't extend to houseplants.

As far as I could tell, Kim took all this completely in stride. She bounded along like a dog in the woods, peeking in an open door here, pausing to look at a picture there, and pelting Rodney with questions I wouldn't have dreamed of asking, like "Are there kids here?"; "What about pets?"; "How many people live here, anyway?"

"It depends," was Rodney's unvarying answer. "Step this way, please."

Our trek ended in a wall covered by a huge South American tapestry of three women making pots. Rodney pulled the tapestry aside, revealing an iron-banded oak door that would have done a medieval castle proud. "The study," he said, and opened the door on a flight of ladder-like steps rising steeply into the shadows.

His voice and gesture reminded me irresistibly of one of those horror movies in which a laconic butler leads the hapless heroine to a forbidding door and invites her to step inside. I didn't know which of three impulses was stronger: to laugh, to run, or, like the heroine, to forge on and see what happened next.

It's some indication of the state I was in that Kim got by me and through the door before I could stop her.

I don't like feeling helpless and I don't like feeling pressured. I really don't like being tricked, manipulated, and herded. Left to myself, I'd have turned around and taken my chances on finding my way out of the maze of corridors. But I wasn't going to leave without my daughter, so I hitched up my wedding-appropriate long skirt and started up the steps.

The stairs were every bit as steep as they looked. I floundered up gracelessly, emerging into a huge space sparsely furnished with a beat-up rolltop desk, a wingback chair and a swan-neck rocker on a threadbare Oriental rug at one end, and some cluttered door-on-sawhorse tables on the other. Ophelia and Rachel, still dressed in their bridal finery, were

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sitting in the chair and the rocker respectively, holding steaming mugs and talking to Kim, who was incandescent with excitement.

"Oh, there you are," said Ophelia as I stumbled up the last step. "Would you like some tea?"

"No, thank you," I said stiffly. "Kim, I think it's time to go home now."

Kim protested, vigorously. Rachel cast Ophelia an unreadable look.

"It'll be fine, love," Ophelia said soothingly. "Mrs. Gordon's upset, and who could blame her? Evie, I don't believe you've actually met Rachel."

Where I come from, social niceties trump everything. Without actually meaning to, I found I was shaking Rachel's hand and congratulating her on her marriage. Close up, she was a handsome woman, with a decided nose, deep lines around her mouth, and the measuring gaze of a gardener examining an unfamiliar insect on her tomato leaves. I didn't ask her to call me Evie.

Ophelia touched my hand. "Never mind," she said soothingly. "Have some tea. You'll feel better."

Next thing I knew, I was sitting on a chair that hadn't been there a moment before, eating a lemon cookie from a plate I didn't see arrive, and drinking Lapsang Souchong from a cup that appeared when Ophelia reached for it. Just for the record, I didn't feel better at all. I felt as if I'd taken a step that wasn't there, or perhaps failed to take one that was: out of balance, out of place, out of control.

Kim, restless as a cat, was snooping around among the long tables.

"What's with the flying fish?" she asked.

"They're for Rachel's new experiment," said Ophelia. "She thinks she can bring the dead to life again."

"You better let me tell it, Ophie," Rachel said. "I don't want Mrs. Gordon thinking I'm some kind of mad scientist."

In fact, I wasn't thinking at all, except that I was in way over my head.

"I'm working on animating extinct species," Rachel said. "I'm particularly interested in dodos and passenger pigeons, but eventually, I'd like to work up to bison and maybe woolly mammoths."

"Won't that create ecological problems?" Kim objected. "I mean, they're way big, and we don't know much about their habits or what they ate or anything."

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There was a silence while Rachel and Ophelia traded family-joke smiles. "That's why we need you," Rachel said.

Kim looked as though she'd been given the pony she'd been agitating for since fourth grade. Her jaw dropped. Her eyes sparkled. And I lost it.

"Will somebody please tell me what the hell you're talking about?" I said. "I've been patient. I followed your pal Rodney through more rooms than Versailles and I didn't run screaming, and believe me when I tell you I wanted to. I've drunk your tea and listened to your so-called explanations, and I still don't know what's going on."

Kim turned to me with a look of blank astonishment. "Come on, Mom. I can't believe you don't know that Ophelia and Rachel are witches. It's perfectly obvious."

"We prefer not to use the W word," Rachel said. "Like most labels, it's misleading and inaccurate. We're just people with natural scientific ability who have been trained to ask the right questions."

Ophelia nodded. "We learn to ask the things themselves. They always know. Do you see?"

"No," I said. "All I see is a roomful of junk and a garden that doesn't care what season it is."

"Very well," said Rachel, and rose from her chair. "If you'll just come over here, Mrs. Gordon, I'll try to clear everything up."

At the table of the flying fish, Ophelia arranged us in a semi-circle, with Rachel in a teacherly position beside the exhibits. These seemed to be A) the fish; and B) one of those Japanese good-luck cats with one paw curled up by its ear and a bright enameled bib.

"As you know," Rachel said, "my field is artificial intelligence. What that means, essentially, is that I can animate the inanimate. Observe." She caressed the porcelain cat between its ears. For two breaths, nothing happened. Then the cat lowered its paw and stretched itself luxuriously. The light glinted off its bulging sides; its curly red mouth and wide painted eyes were expressionless.

"Sweet," Kim breathed.

"It's not really alive," Rachel said, stroking the cat's shiny back. "It's still porcelain. If it jumps off the table, it'll break."

"Can I pet it?" Kim asked.

"No!" Rachel and I said in firm and perfect unison.

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"Why not?"

"Because I'd like you to help me with an experiment." Rachel looked me straight in the eye. "I'm not really comfortable with words," she said. "I prefer demonstrations. What I'm going to do is hold Kim's hand and touch the fish. That's all."

"And what happens then?" Kim asked eagerly.

Rachel smiled at her. "Well, we'll see, won't we? Are you okay with this, Mrs. Gordon?"

It sounded harmless enough, and Kim was already reaching for Rachel's hand. "Go ahead," I said.

Their hands met, palm to palm. Rachel closed her eyes. She frowned in concentration and the atmosphere tightened around us. I yawned to unblock my ears.

Rachel laid her free hand on one of the fish.

It twitched, head jerking galvanically; its wings fanned open and shut.

Kim gave a little grunt, which snapped my attention away from the fish. She was pale and sweating a little.

I started to go to her, but I couldn't. Someone was holding me back.

"It's okay, Evie," Ophelia said soothingly. "Kim's fine, really. Rachel knows what she's doing."

"Kim's pale," I said, calm as the eye of a storm. "She looks like she's going to throw up. She's not fine. Let me go to my daughter, Ophelia, or I swear you'll regret it."

"Believe me, it's not safe for you to touch them right now. You have to trust us."

My Great-Aunt Fanny I'll trust you, I thought, and willed myself to relax in her grip. "Okay," I said shakily. "I believe you. It's just, I wish you'd warned me."

"We wanted to tell you," Ophelia said. "But we were afraid you wouldn't believe us. We were afraid you would think we were a couple of nuts. You see, Kim has the potential to be an important zoologist — if she has the proper training. Rachel's a wonderful teacher, and you can see for yourself how complementary their disciplines are. Working together, they...."

I don't know what she thought Kim and Rachel could accomplish, because the second she was more interested in what she was saying than

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in holding onto me, I was out of her hands and pulling Kim away from the witch who, as far as I could tell, was draining her dry.

That was the plan, anyway.

As soon as I touched Kim, the room came alive.

It started with the flying fish leaping off the table and buzzing past us on Saran Wrap wings. The porcelain cat thumped down from the table and, far from breaking, twined itself around Kim's ankles, purring hollowly. An iron plied itself over a pile of papers, smoothing out the creases. The teddy bear growled at it and ran to hide behind a toaster.

If that wasn't enough, my jacket burst into bloom.

It's kind of hard to describe what it's like to wear a tropical forest. Damp, for one thing. Bright. Loud. Uncomfortable. Very, very uncomfortable. Overstimulating. There were flowers and parrots screeching (yes, the flowers, too — or maybe that was me). It seemed to go on for a long time, kind of like giving birth. At first, I was overwhelmed by the chaos of growth and sound, unsure whether I was the forest or the forest was me. Slowly I realized that it didn't have to be a chaos, and that if I just pulled myself together, I could make sense of it. That flower went there, for instance, and the teal one went there. That parrot belonged on that vine and everything needed to be smaller and stiller and less extravagantly colored. Like that.

Gradually, the forest receded. I was still holding Kim, who promptly bent over and threw up on the floor.

"There," I said hoarsely. "I told you she was going to be sick."

Ophelia picked up Rachel and carried her back to her wingchair. "You be quiet, you," she said over her shoulder. "Heaven knows what you've done to Rachel. I *told* you not to touch them."

Ignoring my own nausea, I supported Kim over to the rocker and deposited her in it. "You might have told me why," I snapped. "I don't know why people can't just explain things instead of making me guess. It's not like I can read minds, you know. Now, are you going to conjure us up a glass of water, or do I have to go find the kitchen?"

Rachel had recovered herself enough to give a shaky laugh. "Hell, you could conjure it yourself, with a little practice. Ophie, darling, calm down. I'm fine."

Ophelia stopped fussing over her wife long enough to snatch a glass

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of cool mint tea from the air and hand it to me. She wouldn't meet my eyes, and she was scowling. "I told you she was going to be difficult. Of all the damn-fool, pig-headed...."

"Hush, love," Rachel said. "There's no harm done, and now we know just where we stand. I'd rather have a nice cup of tea than listen to you cursing out Mrs. Gordon for just trying to be a good mother." She turned her head to look at me. "Very impressive, by the way. We knew you had to be like Ophie, because of the garden, but we didn't know the half of it. You've got a kick like a mule, Mrs. Gordon. "

I must have been staring at her like one of the flying fish. Here I thought I'd half-killed her, and she was giving me a smile that looked perfectly genuine.

I smiled cautiously in return. "Thank you," I said.

Kim pulled at the sleeve of my jacket. "Hey, Mom, that was awesome. I guess you're a witch, huh?"

I wanted to deny it, but I couldn't. The fact was that the pattern of flowers on my jacket was different and the colors were muted, the flowers more English garden than tropical paradise. There were only three buttons, and they were larks, not parrots. And I felt different. Clearer? More whole? I don't know — different. Even though I didn't know how the magic worked or how to control it, I couldn't ignore the fact — the palpable, provable fact — that it was there.

"Yeah," I said. "I guess I am."

"Me, too," my daughter said. "What's Dad going to say?"

I thought for a minute. "Nothing, honey. Because we're not going to tell him."

WE DIDN'T, EITHER. And we're not going to. There's no useful purpose served by telling people truths they aren't equipped to accept. Geoff's pretty oblivious, anyway. It's true that in the hungover aftermath of Ophelia's blue punch, he announced that he thought the new neighbors might be a bad influence, but he couldn't actually forbid Kim and me to hang out with them because it would look homophobic.

Kim's over at Number 400 most Saturday afternoons, learning how to be a zoologist. She's making good progress. There was an episode with

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zombie mice I don't like to think about, and a crisis when the porcelain cat broke falling out of a tree. But she's learning patience, control, and discipline, which are all excellent things for a girl of fourteen to learn. She and Rachel have reanimated a pair of passenger pigeons, but they haven't had any luck in breeding them yet.

Lucille's the biggest surprise. It turns out that all her nosy-parkerism was a case of ingrown witchiness. Now she's studying with Silver, of all people, to be a psychologist. But that's not the surprise. The surprise is that she left Burney and moved into Number 400, where she has a room draped with chintz and a gray cat named Jezebel and is as happy as a clam at high tide.

I'm over there a lot, too, learning to be a horticulturist. Ophelia says I'm a quick study, but I have to learn to trust my instincts. Who knew I had instincts? I thought I was just good at looking things up.

I'm working on my own garden now. I'm the only one who can find it without being invited in. It's an English kind of garden, like the gardens in books I loved as a child. It has a stone wall with a low door in it, a little central lawn, and a perennial border full of foxgloves and Sweet William and Michelmas daisies. Veronica blooms in the cracks of the wall, and periwinkle carpets the beds where old-fashioned fragrant roses nod heavily to every passing breeze. There's a small wilderness of rowan trees, and a neat shrubbery embracing a pond stocked with fish as bright as copper pennies. Among the dusty-smelling boxwood, I've put a statue of a woman holding a basket planted with stonecrop. She's dressed in a jacket incised with flowers and vines and closed with three buttons shaped like parrots. The fourth button sits on her shoulder, clacking its beak companionably and preening its brazen feathers. I'm thinking of adding a duck pond next, or maybe a wilderness for Kim's menagerie.

Witches don't have to worry about zoning laws.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

How I Helped the Chicago Cubs (Finally!) Win the World Series, by Harper Scott, Aardwolf Press, 2005, $24.95.

I REALIZE that baseball is pretty much considered the national sport of the U.S.A. and if I come out and say that I don't really care for it, half of you reading this will worry about the state of my soul while the other half will simply flip to the next section of this magazine with a muttered, "Doesn't like baseball? Why would I want to read that idiot's opinion?"

But sadly, it's true. Watching baseball is about as entertaining for me as watching paint dry. Though I should add that I loved playing the sport as a kid. I was spectacularly bad at it, but I loved it.

Nevertheless, as a spectator sport...well, the only thing that I can think of that would be more boring than watching baseball would be reading about it. So the book in hand had a big strike against it before I ever read the first page. (Notice, however, that I'm not above stealing baseball metaphors....)

On the other hand, it's a time travel book, and I'm a sucker for that kind of story, so I was still willing to give it a try.

The cover copywriter has done such a fine job of laying out the background, that I'm simply going to quote it:

"The year is 2160. Interstellar flight is common, space stations are as busy as 21st-century airports, and extraterrestrials inhabit Earth. And the Chicago Cubs *still* haven't won the World Series since 1908. Fed up, two Cubs fans use a time machine to travel back to 1908, recruit (okay, kidnap) two players off the last championship Cubs team, and bring them to the future to help the Cubs finally win another World Series."

Of course, it's more complicated than that. For one thing, it turns out that there are two Earths and the pivotal game the old Cubs

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players are being brought to play in is the point where the Earths split and began to run in parallel time lines. For another, changing the past — just a little — isn't as easy as one might think. There are always difficulties, and our heroes run into more than their fair share of them.

And then there's always the chance that the change they make won't bring the two Earths back in line anymore, but will in fact screw things up even more.

Harper Scott (who, coincidentally, is also the narrative-voice character of the book) has a light touch with his prose, knows more about the Cubs than any person probably should, and writes screwball, bantering dialogue as though he was channeling the best of the scriptwriters for old movies like *His Girl Friday*. The sheer enthusiasm of his storytelling propels the reader through this book, regardless of how much they might think they don't care about baseball, or books about baseball.

Or at least it did so with this reader.

Velocity, by Dean Koontz, Bantam, 2005, $27.

As in the Scott novel discussed above, the cover copywriter for Koontz's new book *Velocity* has provided a wonderfully succinct entry point into the story. The back cover has a facsimile of a typewritten note that simply reads:

"If you don't take this note to the police and get them involved, I will kill a lovely blond schoolteacher somewhere in Napa County.

"If you do take this note to the police, I will instead kill an elderly woman active in charity work.

"You have six hours to decide. The choice is yours."

Mind you, that copy writer simply lifted the note from the text of Koontz's book. The note is what bartender Billy Wiles finds on his windshield when he quits work after his shift one evening.

At first he thinks it's just a sick joke. When he shares it with Lanny Olsen, a friend of his on the local police force, Olsen thinks the same. But the next day a blond schoolteacher *is* found murdered and Wiles gets another note, with another ultimatum. Again, there's a deadline, with an impossible choice to be made.

Whenever I think I have Koontz figured out, he ups and surprises me — which is what I want and expect from an author. In the course of his career as well as in a book.

Here Koontz delivers a lean,

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mean thriller. A stripped-down exploration of the dark side of the soul, set to a pace that barely allows readers to catch their breaths. Gone, as well, are the witty repartees between characters. In fact, Wiles — while a loner like many of Koontz's protagonists — isn't particularly likable. I won't say this is an entirely bleak book, but it's not a cheerful one, either.

And it certainly changes my expectations of what I'll find in whatever he writes next. It's like the opening of *Midnight* (1989). The first chapter of that novel introduced Janice Capshaw with all the details and sensibilities that would lead a reader to think she's going to be one of the book's principal characters. Except by the end of the chapter, she was dead.

A mean trick, perhaps — especially since Koontz has that ability to bring a character so vividly to life in a very short time. And what it did was leave me unable to trust Koontz to keep safe other characters I'd come to care about in that and subsequent books — which might very well be the reason he did it.

Velocity explores the dark depths to which we can be pushed, if we're pushed hard enough. It's an uncomfortable feeling, especially when the reader tries to work out what he or she would do if thrust into a similar situation.

And in this weird world in which we're living, that's more likely than we might hope it would be.

Velocity isn't a novel I'm prone to reread, but this first time through, I could barely put it down.

A Girl Like Sugar, Emily Pohl-Weary, McGilligan Books, 2004, Cdn$24.95.

Now, speaking of cover copywriters, sometimes they do too good a job, promising something that the book simply doesn't deliver. I'm not speaking of the tired old hyperbole that we all see through — "The next Stephen King!" or "In the Tradition of Lord of the Rings!" — so much as the more creative kind, such as what drew me into reading *A Girl Like Sugar*:

"Like an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* directed by John Waters."

I'd have watched that. But since it never happened, I was at least happy to be able to read this. Unfortunately, the cover promise didn't pay off. Pohl-Weary's novel owes more to a teen/young twenty-something *Bridget Jones's Diary* than anything produced by Joss Whedon. Which isn't necessarily a bad thing.

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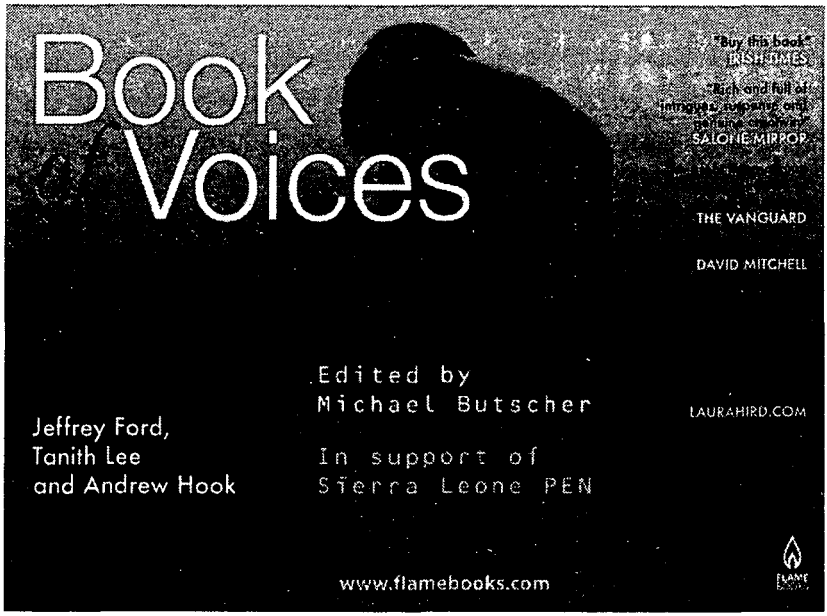

It's just not what I was led to expect (though really, I should have known better by this point in my book-reading life).

A Girl Like Sugar brings us into the life of Sugar Jones for an edgy coming-of-age story. The supernatural element is that Sugar has long conversations and sex with the ghost of her dead boyfriend while trying to sort out the mess of her life, but the strength of the book is Pohl-Weary's winning prose and the spunky (if at times world-weary) first person voice of her protagonist.

It's more mainstream than genre, but no less appealing for that, even without the ghost of John Waters's directorial hand to be found.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

JAMES SALLIS

Life, by Gwyneth Jones, Aqueduct Press, 2004, $19.

Troll: A Love Story, by Johanna Sinisalo, translated from the Finnish by Herbert Lomas, Grove Press, 2004, $12.

Camouflage, by Joe Haldeman, Ace Books, 2004, $23.95.

IN PAST months I've been thinking a lot about the science fiction I read as I was growing up in the fifties, all those stories and novels about repressive governments, theocracies, and religious hegemonies, things like *The Long Tomorrow*, *Wasp*, *The Falling Torch*, and *Sixth Column*. Having always believed science fiction to be at its heart a subversive literature, I've been considering again what those stories say about the time in which they were written. I sit here looking on as, increasingly, public money and government policy flow toward the religious right, as hard-won civil rights become not so much eroded as swept away in the flood of nationalism or swept beneath the magic carpet of this new cold war on terrorism, and I wonder what the science fiction being written now may have to say about the times in which we live.

Paranoia and conspiracies, anyone? A retreat into fantasy, heroic or otherwise? And what of this renascence of far-future space opera? Or the focus on biological issues?

Just random thoughts, mind you: We won't be able to see until the clouds pull back a bit. Meanwhile, we have on hand three recent prizewinners with which to take a momentary sounding.

Science fiction at its best has always worn belt *and* suspenders. It tells a ripping yarn while also asking serious questions about mankind, about mankind's place in the universe, about the universe itself. And one of the questions it asks

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over and again, from *Frankenstein* to *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*? to *The Man Who Fell to Earth* and Damon Knight's "Masks," is this: What does it mean to be human?

For the moment, though, a not-so-serious question, a riddle: It's what happens while you're hanging around waiting for something else. The answer, of course, is *Life*, which is also the title of the novel that brought Gwyneth Jones the Philip K. Dick award. It's a complex book, the sort that a decade or so ago might well have been criticized as not being science fiction at all but a mainstream novel traveling incognito. A sheep in wolf's clothing, so to speak.

The novel centers around scientist Anna Senoz and her discovery of chromosomal material that has started jumping ship from Y to X. Beginning with an inversion of "ordinary" marriage patterns (driven wife, stay-at-home adoring husband), the narrative goes on to reverse or call into question virtually every genre model and role expectation we have. Jones' s genius here, however, is in the many layers and textures of experience she gives us, her recognition that great discoveries, great science, great art — like great sorrow and tragedy — take place against the minutiae of our days: bills that must be paid, petty arguments, ingrown toenails, dyspepsia, dentists.

Charting the early and middle life of a number of characters, Jones exhibits a passion to include it *all:* every clash and crisis and crawlspace of contemporary life, every combination, to wring from her text the very last dollop of significance. Because of this dense packing, *Life* can seem at times programmatic, though at others it seems merely leisurely and loose-jointed, a great ragtag floor-sweeping of a novel. And while believable, her characters, from this same zeal to embrace all experience, are sometimes pushed to the borders of caricature, as with feminist spokeswoman Ramone's many transformations, or Anna's own edginess, self-absorption, and over-thinking. There is humor in this book, but one might have wished for more.

Imagined or not, coming to the party in wolf's clothing or sheep's, this is a novel that strives fully to limn contemporary life, where we began and what we have become. And if finally it may attempt too much and groans a bit beneath the weight...well, great ambition is a fine, wondrously rare thing.

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Cautioning in a brief afterword against any strict autobiographical reading of her novel, Gwyneth Jones remarks that nonetheless "in many ways it's the story of my life as a writer: the experiences that shaped me, the changes that swept over my world, the ideas that made me write the novels I've written, the people who have inspired me; the future I imagine."

And quite a lot about what it is to be human in the first years of this new millennium.

It is small, bird-boned, with paws like a rat's, bright orange eyes, and a pitch-black mane. Angel has rescued it from the alley and brought it to his flat, where he comes upon it the next morning drinking lustily from the toilet. It walks on two legs with a supple lope, bent forward slightly, on tiptoes. Oh — and it secretes pheromones that smell like Calvin Klein cologne and have a profound aphrodisiac effect.

Troll, co-winner of the Tiptree Award, also won the Finlandia Award, Finland's equivalent of the Booker Prize, and has become something of an international rave. This translation, first published in the UK by Peter Owen as *Not Before Sundown*, is by Herbert Lomas.

The narrative is told in first-person from several viewpoints, with the name of the point-of-view character as heading, in brief sections. None of these sections runs over five pages; many are less than a page. Aside from Angel (and of course the troll, named Pessi after the character in a children's book), there are Martes, the co-worker for whom Angel has serious hots; veterinarian and ex-lover Dr. Spiderman; nerdy bookstore owner Ecke, who after a tryst steals Angel's keys and pays dearly for it; and Palomita, the Filipino mail-order bride kept in captivity in the apartment across the hall.

Interspersed with the first-person accounts are excerpts from documents and the media — TV shows, newspaper and scholarly articles, poems, journal entries, snippets from encyclopedias and websites — that serve to fill in the history and mythology of trolls, which have been officially classified (in 1907, in the Finland of this novel) as *Felipithicus trollius*, an endangered species.

The troll's appearance, the effects of the pheromones upon every male around Angel, and Angel's "subterranean" life as a gay man all underscore the theme of demimondes, of worlds that exist side by side,

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unacknowledged and often unsuspected, with the manifest world. Author Sinisalo is wildly at play with notions of inversion: human and animal, hunter and hunted, civilization and wilderness. Palomita is kept as a "pet" in her apartment just as Pessi is kept in Angel's. (Angel and she meet when he goes to cadge cat food for Pessi.) Angel, ever the heartbroken, becomes the heartbreaker. Pessi, symbol of everything wild within us and without, is photographed by Angel for use in an advertisement for upscale, hipper-than-thou "Stalker" jeans.

All in all, Sinisalo gives us an excellent read and a fine fable here, one to me reminiscent of an all-time favorite, John Collier's *His Monkey Wife*. There's considerable humor, too, both of a broad and more subtle strain. And while, for this reader at least, the format with its constant shifts is finally unsatisfying, allowing little by way of sustained development, it might also be argued that the form underscores the fragmentary, patchwork nature of contemporary life.

Whereas *Life* is a thoroughly modern novel and *Troll* a kind of fab fable for our time, *Camouflage*, which shared the Tiptree award with *Troll*, is a throwback of sorts, reminding me of what drew me to science fiction initially: the wonder of the story being told, a story in which there are no limits, in which anything can happen; the sense of otherness working its way through the story into my own life, infusing *it* with wonder. TV sets, trashcans, linoleum, all the appurtenances of daily life: I'd put down my book to find they had all taken on a dull glow.

There's little doubt that science fiction shares a launchpad with epic and myth, pinging away at something deep within us, with those archetypes (golems, resurrections, unseen worlds) that keep springing up like weeds and mushrooms in the kempt grass of our thought.

The changeling came to Earth millions of years ago from the globular cluster Messier 22, from a mephitic environment requiring ultimate adaptability for survival. Here it puts in millennia as a Great White, killer whale, dolphin, or school of fish before, in 1931, crawling from the sea. Killing and taking the form of the first human it meets, it remembers nothing of its origin or distant past, knows nothing of humankind.

By 2019, when the novel's foreground events take place, the

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changeling has learned a great deal. It has passed those years incarnate as prostitute, vagabond, oceanographer, motel television set ("That was educational"), Japanese soldier and American prisoner on the Bataan march, even once a roll of linoleum with legs. And finally as the woman Rae Archer, hired on to help investigate the impossibly dense, impenetrably mysterious artifact discovered deep in a trench in the Pacific — its own starship.

The changeling is looking for the secrets of its past. What it finds (aside from an admiration for humankind and, briefly, the love of one human) is that it is not alone. There is another alien shape-shifter abroad, an instinctive killer, "the chameleon."

Camouflage is a fun read, and Haldeman obviously had a great time writing it. The dialogue crackles with wit, and many scenes are brilliantly comic, as are a multitude of one-liners and asides. During one of the changeling's incarnations: "A shark bit it in two, which was annoying." Of its first kiss: "She inserted her tongue, which was probably not an offering of food." But beneath all this — the comedy, the sprawl of backstories, the serpentine narrative — serious questions are broached. The problem of evil. How we learn. The foundations of ethics.

And what it means to be human.

Never cavalier toward science, even in so freewheeling a narrative, Haldeman addresses many of the things that drive us crazy in movies and bad novels. Where do the clothes come from? The changeling manufactures them as well, just like growing skin. And what about mass? It quite freely removes an arm or leg or two to transform to a smaller entity, or, to become larger, can absorb the family dog or graze the sea bottom taking on crabs and small fish.

Through no fault of his own, however, Haldeman stumbles into science fiction's La Brea tar pit. Once having disrupted things-as-they-are with the introduction of the truly marvelous, the science fiction story typically has two options: return the world to what it was, or (literally or figuratively) blow it up. He chooses the first, which, while unsatisfactory, and bland as it seems to us after all the prior marvels, does little harm, so invested has the reader become in his characters.

And that is of course what makes Joe Haldeman a first-rate novelist. Whether writing (as he

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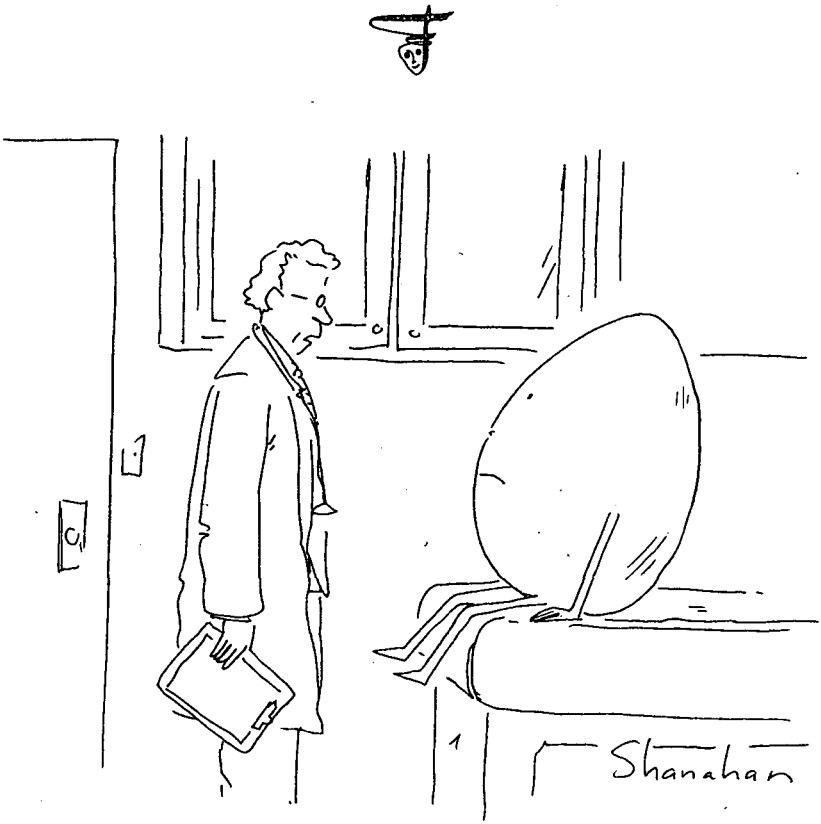
does so brilliantly about war, about intrigue or the intricacies of communication science, or just about people trying to get through the drudge, dust, and detritus of their lives, his characters are forever real to us, forever authentic. They choke up, and we find ourselves clearing our throats.

The most alluring parts of the novel, and the finest writing, deal with the changeling's transformation into a facsimile human, in clear recognition that we *all* begin as aliens and only slowly, by observation and imitation, inching ever closer in our approximations, do we learn to pass.

I've been doing so for years now.



"We found a lumpty."

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Joyce Van Scyoc lives in the San Francisco Bay Area and spends all summer gardening until the October rains drive her inside. But she notes that she recently sold off the upper part of her acre, which means she'll spend less time fighting the jungle of coyote brush and more time writing. "Poppies" is one of the first stories in her long career with a contemporary setting; but you'll definitely recognize the same sensibility here as you'll find in novels like Cloud City, Sunwaifs, *and* Deepwater Dreams.

Poppies by Moonlight

By Sydney J. Van Scyoc

SEATTLE, OLYMPIA, CHEHALIS, Portland....

Carla passed steep-shouldered mountains and forested hillsides, and her mind chattered irritably about forms and schedules, casualty losses, lump sum distributions. Her fingertips twitched, flickering over a phantom keyboard.

Salem, Eugene, Medford....

The great blue lake itself, Shasta, slid past her car window. The journey seemed longer each year, the glare of sunlight on pavement harsher. In the heat of midday, the air conditioner chilled her upper arms. When she turned it off, sweat stood on her upper lip. Each year she followed the asphalt ribbon south with less charity in her heart.

Redding, Willows, Sacramento....

She spent the second night in Stockton, although she could have reached Livermore well before dark. She balanced the books on this unmerited indulgence by choosing a sad little tourist court decked out in powdery turquoise siding. The mattress was flaccid, the pillows flat. Still,

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the motel offered luxury compared to the accommodations waiting at the old ranch house.

The next morning she stepped from the air-chilled unit into a blaze of August sunlight. She ordered breakfast at a nearby cafe. After nudging oily eggs and limp bacon around her plate with the tines of her fork, she ate only toast.

Soon the steering wheel burned her fingers again. She frowned into the morning sun, contemplating the shape of her life: fifty weeks a year tapping away in her cubicle, the other two driving south to put Rob's life back in order.

She left I-5 near Manteca and steered west toward San Francisco. Reaching Livermore, she left the freeway and navigated ever-narrowing roads past vineyards and ranch lands. Soon she was deep in undulating hills brittle with dry summer grasses. Solitary oaks hunched great and green. A few persistent poppies specked the dry grass, orange petals open to the sun.

Her return was like some dumb, unreasoning migration. Salmon swam upstream. Birds flew north, flew south. Gray whales spouted along the coast. Carla returned to the dry hills.

Her fingers twitched across the invisible keyboard. Where did she file her feelings for her stepbrother? What form did she pull up on the screen to report her bone-weariness with Rob? Pointless to formulate threats. *I can't keep coming back here every summer. I can't keep cobbling your life back together just because I promised Steve....*

So? Did I ask you to promise Dad stuff?

A sharp curve and the old ranch house appeared on the gentle slope, little changed. It was a rambling frame structure with all-but-vanished paint, sagging porch, and shrunken window frames. The plum tree had died several years before but its tortured skeleton remained. The pepper tree, heat-tolerant, drought-resistant, spilled feathery green foliage in a broad circle. Its trunk was a column of bulging tumors clothed in scaling bark.

Carla followed the curve of the road to the dirt drive and turned past the mailbox.

Thuselah had crushed a path through the shaggy grass at the side of the house. Carla could not tell if the brown layer that masked its aged

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fenders was summer dust or winter mud. Probably both. But — incredibly — Rob had cleaned the entire windshield instead of simply swiping ineffectually at the driver's side. And sometime since last August, he had welded a toolbox into the truckbed.

Promising signs if the truck weren't parked beside the house midmorning on a weekday.

Carla sat for a moment selecting a grimace to suit the occasion: grim efficiency, barely repressed anger, aloof dispassion. The tap on the car window made her start. With a sharp intake of breath, she turned and stared into features she had barely glimpsed for years.

Rob bent, grinning in at her. "Well? You getting out?" He motioned for her to unlock the door, then swung it open.

Stiffly she emerged, still staring. "You shaved." Without the usual scruffy facial growth, without the straggle of unbarbered hair, without the grimy A's cap shadowing his eyes, he looked jarringly like Steve.

"It happens. Didn't know when you'd get here. Would've laid out the red carpet."

She licked dry lips. "I'm sure you would have." How many years since she had seen him wearing clean shirt and denims — simultaneously at that? "New girlfriend?" she ventured.

His teeth flashed. "Single again. You missed the last one by five months."

Her brows arched. "Anyone I knew?" Rob's girlfriends cycled in and out of the old ranch house on a schedule too complex to be charted. His taste was eclectic: all shades of red, blonde, and brown; willowy or pillowy; obliging, bitchy, occasionally psychotic. Sometimes, two wished to occupy his hearth simultaneously. Then there was minor bloodshed or a vandalized vehicle.

Five months without gentle companionship was unprecedented. Had the crop failed?

His eyes, bottle green specked with brown, *were* strangely clear. "You never met them all, Carli. Luggage?"

She keyed open the trunk. "You're proposing to carry it?"

"Do you see someone else here?" The suitcase handle was already in his hand. "How was the drive? Did you miss the big pile-up south of Redding yesterday?"

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"I didn't hear about it."

"Don't know how you can drive that far without turning on the car radio," he said, leading the way up the trampled path to the front steps. He turned to peer back at her. "Don't want anything but spread sheets and tax forms cluttering up your brain, I guess."

There was a familiar crinkle at the corners of his eyes. *Steve*. "I like to be able to pay the rent," she said shortly.

"Welcome to move in here anytime. We can run down to the Salvation Army place, pick up furniture for the other bedroom. Well hasn't run dry yet."

"And you'll be here until it does," she said flatly.

"Told you that often enough. I'm not gonna inherit another place like this one. I'm all out of granddaddies."

Well, perhaps it was better he wasn't interested in selling the property. The money would rush through his fingers within a year.

She noticed the steps had been shored up with new lumber. The weathered floorboards of the porch had been swept. But the front door still sagged and scraped, reassuring her that the Earth had not shifted on its axis.The change in the front parlor was not subtle. The old couch had a strangely naked look without the normal accumulation of castoff clothing, discarded food wrappers, dust, and semi-feral cats. Apparently the cats had taken their shed fur with them; there was no sign of it drifting against the baseboards. A neatly folded newspaper lay on a slightly scarred coffee table. A second table supported a new acquisition, a working television set. A game show audience cheered in manic abandon.

Carla drew a hand back through her hair, struggling to orient herself. "The power is on." Normally — *normally*? — the utilities had been cut off this long after her previous visit. Getting service reinstated had been the first item on her preplanned agenda.

"The power is on. The pump is running. Thuselah is smogged and registered. I rebuilt the shelves in the pantry last month. There's pork and beans enough to last us a month. Chicken soup. Canned spaghetti. You want to help me pick out a refrigerator in town? Then we can get TV dinners and a box of Fudgesicles."

All the culinary delights. She had known Rob since he was fourteen

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and he was still a kid seventeen years later. "Who's paying for this alleged appliance, Rob?"

"Your favorite stepbrother's paying. And we're getting a new one. There's a big appliance store in Dublin. All we have to do is go down and pick out a box."

"You must have had a good year."

A careless shrug. "Crop burned up in the sun last September. I forgot to water it. Never got it in the ground this year."

Well, that accounted for the clear-eyed gaze. "Plenty of odd jobs then?"

"Sure."

His tone wasn't convincing. She narrowed her eyes.

A second shrug. "Okay, I've got a boarder. Pays for the little extras."

"He's using the bedroom?" she demanded sharply. "And that leaves me to sleep where?"

"You're using the bedroom. We'll make do out here. He won't be around till later. You hungry?"

She sighed and admitted that she was. He vanished toward the bedroom with her suitcase.

They dined on a clean-scrubbed table: pork and beans, saltines, warm cola, jelly beans, crusty-stale doughnuts. Incredibly there were paper napkins, although they bore the Taco Bell logo.

Rob wiped his lips. "When we get that refrigerator, we're going to have cold root beer and ice cream to make floats. And watermelon. He'll get a kick out of spitting watermelon seeds."

The boarder. Obviously another Peter Pan. Carla set down her cola can. "Does your boarder have a name?"

"He's not from around here." His grin was sly.

Thirty-one going on fifteen. But the engaging glint in his eyes was Steve's. *Steve. Her mother's third formally ratified mate, her own first crush. But did a simple crush leave such an imprint that no one could touch her again*? "Even people from other countries have names, Rob," she said with strained patience.

He shrugged. "Sure. But sometimes you can't pronounce them."

"Where does he come from?"

"One of those places. You know." An indefinite flutter of one hand.

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"What kind of work does he do?"

Rob was enjoying the grilling. "He told me about it once. Didn't make much sense to me."

"High tech?" Lawrence Livermore Lab was just a few miles down the freeway; Silicon Valley was within commuting distance. If the boarder was supporting a family left behind in India or Latin America, sharing Rob's roof made a certain sense. This was definitely the low rent district.

"Could be. If we take Thuselah, we can haul the refrigerator back ourselves. Get it plugged in before dinnertime."

Bemused, she realized her fingers had quit twitching at the invisible keyboard. Rob had hooked her. He was reeling her into his universe, a world where whimsy and impulse ruled and reality morphed to suit the mood of the moment. "Why not?"

How much could it hurt to set aside her own stiff, whaleboned reality for a day or two? If there was nothing for her to do here, she could run up to San Francisco later in the week. She hadn't promised Steve she would give Rob a full two weeks every year. She had promised to keep an eye out for him.

This job is different, Carli-girl. If something goes wrong, if I don't make it back.... She squeezed the bridge of her nose and pushed back her chair.

Thuselah bumped to the road with its usual lurching enthusiasm. A shaggy orange cat, startled, burst from the weeds and ducked beneath the pepper tree.

"New cat?" He appeared better fed than Rob's cats normally did.

"Yeah. Satan got himself run over in March. Loopy's holed up somewhere with a new litter. That one showed up last month." He dragged at the shift lever. "We'll make a few stops in Livermore along the way. Better pick up some cat chow while I'm at it."

The supermarket was shiny-new, representative of the sprawl that had overtaken Robert Livermore's dusty little ranch town. Rob emerged with a cart overloaded with cat kibble. But after he had loaded the truck, they continued to make stops. Liquor store, convenience store, chain pharmacy — Rob returned to the truck empty-handed each time except for the wallet he tucked back into his pocket.

After the fourth stop, Carla blotted sweat from her forehead and demanded irritably, "What are you shopping for?"

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"Shopping? Oh — " Rob grinned, pulling the wallet back out of his pocket. He opened it and fanned his thumb across a thick wad of bills. "I'm shopping for cash. Not doing bad either."

For one heart-stopping moment, she expected to hear the whine of sirens. But they weren't barreling full-speed out of the parking lot. No one came running from the store in arm-waving agitation. She met Rob's eyes, brow sharply raised.

"Lottery. One more stop and we can pay full cash for the fridge."

"For God's sake, how many tickets did you have to buy to win that amount?"

He met her incredulity with a happy grin. "*He* buys them. Picks them up all around Livermore. Runs down to Dublin sometimes. Out to Pleasanton. Probably have to start driving to the City soon, just so there won't be any questions. Spread the action around. Not a bad way to pay the rent, huh?"

The boarder. "He buys lottery tickets and you take the winnings as rent?" For a moment, she almost bought it.

"Not bad, huh? No paperwork. No taxes. He never takes a big bite from anyone. Just small change. But it adds up."

"And when he loses?"

"Guess the cats would go hungry if that ever happened." He coaxed Thuselah into gear. "So what does that do to your accountant's heart?"

"You've told me yourself I don't have a heart." She studied him as he steered Thuselah into afternoon traffic. The grin lingered at the corners of his mouth. *Thirty-one going on fifteen.* Well, let him have his joke. Whatever he was up to, at least the authorities hadn't caught up with him yet.

Nearing Dublin, they negotiated their way to the frontage road, where the appliance store sat at the center of a freshly striped lot. Its doors slid with a swish at their approach, exhaling chilled air.

The refrigerators stood in gleaming white ranks near the rear of the store. Rob bypassed the smaller ones, tugging open the doors of the larger ones, peering critically at shelves and bins. "Denise would've got a kick out of this. Which one you think she would've taken?"

Carla's lips tightened. She had no doubt how her mother would have proceeded. "She would have picked the biggest one here." She would have

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tossed her auburn mane and jangled her bracelets and charmed some dazzled male clerk into delivering the unit on credit. When they came to repossess it a few months later, there would have been a scummy puddle of tomato juice under the vegetable bin and a layer of melted ice cream refrozen to the freezer shelf.

"Yeah, she was a gal, wasn't she? I used to think when I got older, she would divorce Dad and marry me."

Carla bristled, expecting a taunting gaze. *How had he divined her fantasies about Steve?* But Rob had gone to the next appliance, and when he glanced back, a pensive frown darkened his eyes.

"You had a crush on my mother?" she said incredulously.

"Yeah," he admitted. "She fried me eggs for breakfast sometimes, when she was sober. And the way those bracelets slid up and down her arms — "

A tremor rippled through Carla's body. *The way Denise slid through life, every day a fresh slice of chaos: husbands, boyfriends, one night stands; lost jobs and small frauds; paranoid fantasies balanced by facile charm....*

"Damn shame," Rob said. "A woman like that. If she hadn't tried to beat that train — " He shrugged. "At least she didn't get old and fat."

"What a blessing." Carla rubbed her bare arms. The entire store was like a freezer.

"Sorry," Rob said. "I just mean — "

"I know what you mean." Denise would have aged badly. At thirty-four, her figure had already begun to erode, her charm to slip. "Do you plan to choose a refrigerator today?"

"Which one you want?"

"I'm leaving in ten days, Rob." When he continued to peer at her questioningly, she shrugged. "I'd choose one small enough that it wouldn't break through the floorboards."

He nodded. "Good point. Should have rebuilt the kitchen floor last spring."

"You can get to it later," she assured him. She sighed, recognizing that she felt something quite alien toward Rob: a vagrant tenderness. Because Denise had fried eggs for him?

More because he remembered it; because he clung to the memory just

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as she clung to the memory of those afternoons when Steve had picked her up after school and stopped at Dairy Queen on the way home.

That had been a precious year of stability, the first she had experienced. The bland white frozen confection had seemed an emblem of security and promise.

How quickly that illusion had melted. Well, sometimes life was a speeding train. Sometimes it was a cage of twisted steel, and sometimes it was just one poorly reasoned decision. But that year had taught her that order and security were possible. She had spent the next sixteen years implementing the lesson.

She frowned, her fingertips curling over an invisible keyboard. "Let's take that one. It's big enough to hold everything you need."

She was glad for the heat in the truck. Rob secured the appliance box and they bumped their way back into the rolling brown hills. The silence between them held a new, untested degree of companionship. Reaching the house, they wrestled the box from the truck bed and up the steps. Half an hour later the refrigerator sat chilling.

Rob regarded it with proud affection. "I'll go in town for watermelon later." He darted a glance at Carla. "He told me to call him José."

The boarder. "He's Latin American?" Please, not Colombian.

"No, he was just trying to come up with something I could pronounce. Didn't understand about Latinos and Anglos and all the rest. Hey, time for my siesta. Have to take care of the body. I'll stretch out under the pepper tree if you want to watch TV."

"I brought a book. I'll lie down with it for a while. Do you have clean sheets for the bed?"

"Put them on the bed a couple of days ago. Been sleeping on the couch ever since." He rubbed his palms against his denims, self-conscious under her freshly assessing gaze. "You remember how Dad was, Carli. Guess it was because of that stint in the Army when he was a kid. A place for everything. Keep your mind on the job. Do it right or don't do it at all."

You start it, you finish it. Put your brain in gear before you run your mouth. Think, damnit!

"I remember." In Steve's world, life had been structured and disciplined. Even Denise had welcomed the change at first, before her own anarchic nature had reasserted itself. And when she had broken loose,

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Steve had gone about the job of corraling her with such grit-jawed persistence that he might eventually have domesticated her. Given time.

But there had been no time, not for Denise, and then not for Steve. Carla pinched the bridge of her nose.

"I know," Rob said. "Time ran out on them. But some of the stuff he tried to teach me? I'm beginning to get it, Carli. I'm beginning to get myself in order. You know why I didn't put the crop in this spring? Not even a few plants for myself? They can take your vehicle if they catch you with the stuff. All these years I never thought about that. I could lose Thuselah. I could wind up in Santa Rita, and then who would feed the cats? I'm beginning to use my head."

"I can see that," she agreed. Improbably, after the long years of his adolescence, he was growing up. One day he might even be a functioning adult. "Rob, Steve would be proud."

He shrugged. "I'll never be as sharp as he was. He knew what he was doing from day one. He always played it so damn smart. If he hadn't been so upset about Denise, if he hadn't gone after that armored truck by himself — "

But she couldn't talk about that, not with tears stinging her eyelids. "It was a long drive, Rob. I need to lie down."

"Sure."

He turned off the television and arranged himself on the couch. Carla stretched out on the neatly made bed and closed her eyes. After a few moments, drowsing, she was aware of a careful approach, a light-footed presence. She extended her hand and touched fur. Cautiously the cat curled near her and they slept.

She woke much later to the sound of Thuselah rumbling away toward the road. She sat, unintentionally scattering the three cats who had joined her in bed. She checked her watch: after five. Late afternoon heat sat heavy and still in the room.

The cats had vanished. Carla smoothed her hair and wandered through the house. With Rob gone, its very stillness was haunting. Rob's grandfather, Steve's father, had lived here, solitary in his last years. What hopes had he brought here as a young man? Steve had played in the creek as a boy. Had gone from here to the Army, where he had learned order and discipline and the uses of firearms.

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It was a miracle Rob had not fathered a brood of feckless offspring here.

The refrigerator hummed quietly. Carla opened a tepid cola, fetched the newspaper from the coffee table, and ventured out the back door.

The back stoop was a frail structure, little more than a rickety platform with steps leading into the untidy grasses that stood on the slope behind the house. A geranium in a black plastic pot bloomed valiantly at the corner of the stoop. Carla touched the soil. It was damp.

Last year the crop had burned up in the sun. This year Rob remembered to water a geranium. Hope in small doses.

She peered down the slope. Stunted late summer poppies dotted the brittle grass with sparse color. A small stream wandered at the foot of the slope, hidden by coyote brush, blackberry vines, and a few scrubby trees. By this time of year, the stream would be little more than a trickle. Turkey vultures circled in the distance.

Narrowing her eyes, she saw indistinct forms moving in the streamside brush. Deer come to drink. She sighed, letting the twenty-first century go, releasing herself into timelessness.

It was almost eight and the poppies had furled for the night when she went back into the house. She opened a can of tuna for dinner. Corn chips and jelly beans rounded out the menu. She was opening another cola — colder this time — when she heard Thuselah draw up beside the house.

She waited for Rob to join her. Instead she heard his boots crushing the dry grass behind the house. She shrugged, sipping the cola.

After a while, the kitchen grew dark. Rob did not come in.

Had he lied to her about the crop? Were there plants tucked in at the bottom of the slope again this year, camouflaged by coyote brush? Hard to believe he cared enough to lie to her.

Moonlight shone faintly in the window. Setting down the empty can, she stepped to the back door.

The air on the rickety stoop had grown cooler. The dry grasses seemed to exhale a faintly musty breath. Carla peered down the slope.

Indistinct forms moved in the tall brush, capturing moonlight, offering it back as a pale silver glow. As she watched, two of the luminescent forms emerged from the brush and capered nimbly through the grass.

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Fawns. Fawns haloed by light. Fawns at play, silver auras dancing around them.

Carla's breath came short as she tried, from force of habit, to make sense of what she saw. Tried to bridge the chasm between reality and the unlikely images that played upon her eyes. Auras did not fall within her belief system. Glowing fawns did not inhabit her conceptual universe. Warm, living bodies did not take up moonlight and cast it back tenfold.

Frowning, confused, she peered down at her own bare arm, pressed it with her fingertips. It was warm and resilient. Moonlight touched it but did not glow from within it. She licked her lips, aware of the rising tide-surge of adrenaline. It pricked at the skin of her face and neck, made the blood rush at her eardrums, drove her heart against her ribs — urged her into motion.

Fight or flee —

The command was primal, the choice clear-cut. No sane person charged a dancing light. Yet she did not move.

She thought at first that simple fear kept her in place on the stoop, joints locked, muscles frozen. She thought some panic-disruption in her nervous system prevented the crackling messages her brain transmitted from reaching her legs.

It was worse. She recognized that slowly as the fawns played. Some external force locked her into place. She was caught like a fly in an invisible web. Held in bondage, small electrical surges rippling along her nervous system. She quivered involuntarily.

And at the same time, she was aware of an unfamiliar, deepening clarity — of vision, of thought. The dry grasses shimmered into sharp focus. The sky glittered with thousands of distinctly defined stars. Slowly the process of her own thoughts opened to her in a depth she had never experienced. If she could push aside panic and step undistracted into their flow, chart their course —

Three larger deer emerged shining from the brush, noses brushing the grass. They browsed a slow, wandering path along the slope while the luminous fawns continued to scamper and leap. Carla was held captive in the presence of unearthly beauty, of breath-stopping wonder. Of fear.

There were explanations. A trick of light. An illusion. A hallucinogen slipped into her food or drink. *Rob....*

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He stepped from the streamside brush and moved slowly toward the stoop, casting light about him in a misty cloud. She recognized the breadth of his shoulders, the cast of his features, recognized the shirt he wore. But when he neared, he gazed up at her and there was nothing of Steve in his face. Nor of Rob. He approached the steps, his features glowing with undisguised pleasure. "So pleased," he said when he stood directly below her. His voice was a bodiless whisper.

The unnatural clarity of her thoughts had intensified with his every approaching step. Even so, it amazed her how quickly she understood who he was. "José," she said. The boarder. A boarder who paid not for the use of kitchen and bedroom but for use of Rob's body itself: arms, legs, eyes, mouth.

"So pleased," he repeated. So pleased that she understood. His pleasure with her swift comprehension intensified the light he cast. Within the glowing nimbus, dried grass stems stood distinct and poppies, furled for the night, slowly opened. Their orange glow heightened to fiery radiance.

"Not high tech," she said. And definitely not from around here. "What are you doing here?" She was not afraid to speak sharply. She knew well enough, without pausing to examine the fact of her knowing, that she had nothing to fear from José.

Still the anomaly of his presence shivered along her spine, a distinct, multifaceted terror.

"We have come to refresh," he said. "We have come to — to walk within bodily senses. To taste. To hear. We have come, my disciples and I. I am teacher to them? Guide? I safeguard them while they enjoy cool water and hot sunlight. I have come and Rob has given to me himself. We share, Rob and I."

He borrowed — leased? rented? — Rob's body, his senses for a part of each day, then relinquished them to Rob. "A sort of time share," she said. "And you go into town and buy lottery tickets for him."

"So simple to repay him. What numbers I choose, chance chooses as well. So convenient. Yet I discern that you are not pleased."

"I don't know what I am," she said flatly. She only knew that she was bound tight within his web and terrorized by his very existence. What had happened to reality? She had never found the world a particularly hospitable

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place, yet she had learned to protect herself and to swing wide around the most dangerous shoals. *What now?*

"Regrets," he said. The poppies at his feet dimmed slightly. "Please understand we will not remain long. Ten of human years. Twenty at most. Then the refreshment will be complete. We will return to our home enhanced."

"And others? I suppose there will be others."

"Improbable. It is a rare taste, this. My disciples will learn to communicate the experience in satisfactory form to later seekers. My following is small. A few who choose to be deer. A few who soar as hawks. One enjoys the owl hunt. I permit several, who wish their visits brief, to stalk as cats. One wishes to live as Thuselah but I have forbidden. It is not suitable."

She laughed too sharply. "No. Not suitable at all. Will you *please* let me go?"

Incomprehension darkened him momentarily. "Ah," he said, drawing his nimbus of light more tightly around him. "Regrets. Please understand, we will leave nothing changed. No harm. No damage. No litter?"

A second bark of laughter escaped her. The invisible web had yielded. She could move, although she still felt a faint, charged ripple along her spine. She stepped back quickly, pressing against the door. "I'm sure you won't litter, José. You've been watching television, haven't you?"

"From the television I learn to speak better. I learn I must not cast light when I go among people. I learn to understand better the thoughts I find in Rob's mind. I learn the context of Rob and his family. I meet you there sometimes. I meet Denise. I meet Steve. It is regrettable, Steve."

Regrettable that he had decided to make the career move from banks to armored trucks at a time when his judgment and his reflexes were impaired by grief.

She pressed one hand to her eyes, driving back tears. Blindly she turned. *Run!* The command was still there, and she was free to obey it. "Don't follow me!" she said sharply. "Stay out of the house until I'm gone. Just stay out!"

"Carli...."

She understood him well enough to know that he would not pursue her, would not try to hold her back. Not physically at least. As she rushed

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blindly through the parlor, the television pleaded briefly, "I give him a gift, Carli. I give Rob more than money."

"I know! I know!" Rob had felt the clarity too. Rob had stepped into that zone of enhanced comprehension. Rob was beginning to get it, beginning to understand the things Steve had tried to teach him. Another year and Rob might be thirty-two going on eighteen, even nineteen. He might indeed grow up.

She had not unpacked and so she merely grabbed her suitcase and ran, her purse slapping against her thigh. She skittered down the front steps, stumbled through the tall grass, fumbled for her key.

And the old ranch house was behind her. She was winding her way back to the freeway, to asphalt and sanity. If there were deer on the dark hillsides, they did not move in radiance. No bodiless whisper followed her, explaining. She already understood too well.

Understood without being told. José found thoughts in Rob's mind. And something of José's clarity lingered in Rob's mind even after José withdrew. She thought of poppies opening within the force field of José's presence. Rob was opening too, however slowly.

Her foot rode the accelerator hard. In the light of that same lingering clarity, she began to understand her own terror more fully. Taillights appeared before her, headlights vanished behind her. She did not stop to review her route. She simply drove.

Stockton, Sacramento, Willows, Redding....

Terror fueled her but not the car. By the time she pulled into an all-night station, the energy of panic had deserted her and tears washed her cheeks. She swabbed them away angrily and got out to fill the tank.

She pulled up a fictional client and worked her way down his 1040 line by line, her fingertips tapping against the car fender.

It didn't work. For so many years she had imposed a welter of schedules and tables and forms between herself and the inner chasm. She had made her life a haven of calculation and order. She had closed the door on chaos — and on trust, on companionship, on joy.

How old was *she*? She had never stopped to calculate that. Thirty-three going on a hundred and two?

It sounded about right. And her crush on Steve? What safer than being committed forever to a dead man? He had never disappointed her, never

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hurt her — never would. But he would never take her to Dairy Queen again either. And she had allowed no one else near.

The tank filled, she returned to the car and sat with her forehead against the steering wheel. She thought of poppies opening in the moonlight — thought of the unwelcome comprehension that had stalked her relentlessly down the freeway, opening bright-burning petals in her mind.

That morning she had fallen down the rabbit hole into Rob's reality. Tonight José's energies had touched her and she had tumbled into the truth of her own reality. She understood what she had wished never to understand: she had erected barricades, but behind them she was as defenseless as she had ever been; and she was alone.

A tap at her window. A young male face, concerned. "You okay?"

Wearily she shook her head, keyed the engine to life. "No," she said. She was far too old, the very bones of her life brittle to the snapping point.

If she continued northward, she suspected, if she put Rob and José behind her, after a while she might regain the safety of her fortress. The edges of clarity would blur. Her fingers would tap, tap, tap, and the barricades would rise around her again.

And behind them, she would remain as helpless as a day-old bunny.

Wasn't there some better way? Some way to step out into all the disorder and hostility of the world and grow strong? Some way to build for herself a permeable armor, a shield that would protect her yet let life and warmth through?

"You sure you're okay to drive?"

"No," she said. Possibilities were exploding in her mind, half blinding her. Impatiently she started the engine and swung the car around. She hesitated for a moment, gathering courage, then aimed the vehicle at the southbound onramp.

Redding, Willows, Sacramento, Stockton....

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This issue's trip back through time comes to us from Allen Steele, who took a break from his work on his latest novel, Coyote Frontier, *to contribute a story to the chapbook published at Eeriecon, a science fiction convention in Niagara Falls, New York. We're happy to reprint it here.*

An Incident at the Luncheon of the Boating Party

By Allen M. Steele

I SWEAR TO YOU, IT WAS AN accident. I never intended to interfere with the past; indeed, I had been trained to avoid doing anything that might alter the timeline. It was just a fluke, a minor mistake. And it wasn't as if I changed history. Not much, at least.

Let me explain....

The night before, the *Miranda* dropped me on the outskirts of Chatou, a village on the Seine about fifteen kilometers southwest of Paris. The timeship was in chameleon mode when it made its brief touchdown; no one observed my arrival. After making my way into town, I took a room at a small inn, one which the advance team had already selected as appropriate for a young lady traveling on her own. My cover story, if anyone asked, was that I was from Orleans and on my way to Paris to visit my brother. No one at the inn was curious, however, and I spent the night unnoticed.

The following morning, I made a point of asking the innkeeper to recommend a place where I might have lunch. He told me about several

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cafés in town, but I pretended to be uninterested until he happened to mention the Restaurant Fournaise, located on a small island in the Seine near Chatou. Oh, but that's perfect! How may I get there? The innkeeper, being a proper host — who says the French are rude? — immediately sent a boy down to the waterfront to hire a boat for me.

It was a warm Saturday in late August, 1880; the first colors of autumn were upon the trees, and although the air was humid, nonetheless there was a breeze upon the river. As the oarsman paddled his rowboat toward the island, I caught sight of the restaurant: a three-story chateau, built of red brick and white limestone, rising above a small wooden pier where several sailboats and canoes had been tied up. A second-floor balcony overlooked the Seine, and I could make out several figures standing beneath its orange-striped awning.

I tried not to stare, even though I felt a rush of anticipation. Here was the place where one of the great masterpieces of European art had been — that is, would be — created. Yet I wasn't greatly concerned. After all, this was only a Class-3 mission: very low-risk, with minimal danger and little chance of affecting the timeline. Not at all like other historical surveys undertaken by the Chronospace Research Centre, such as the Class-1 expeditions to the Battle of Little Big Horn or the sinking of the *Titanic*. Indeed, it was only because Chief Commissioner Sanchez had a personal fondness for the nineteenth-century Impressionist movement that I was allowed to undertake this sortie in the first place. Perhaps it wasn't as important as, say, witnessing the Kennedy Assassination, but nonetheless history would be served by whatever I managed to discover.

Reaching up to my hat as if to keep it from being snatched away by the wind, I surreptitiously activated the recorders concealed within its band. From here on, everything that I saw and heard would be stored in memory. The oarsman helped me out of the boat, and I walked down the pier to the ground floor entrance.

The maître'd met me at the door, inquired if I needed a table. Oh, no, I'm here to meet a friend for lunch. I believe I may be early, but we're supposed to rendezvous on the balcony. Raising an eyebrow, he smiled knowingly. *Oui*, of course. This way, please. And then he led me inside, escorted me up a flight of stairs and through the dining room, until we reached an open door leading to the balcony.

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A long row of small, square tables, each covered with white linen, with wooden chairs arranged around each one. The maître'd seated me at the end of the balcony, asked if I'd like some wine while I waited. Of course, *merci*. A short bow, then he vanished, leaving me alone.

Pretending to be a young mademoiselle waiting for the arrival of a gentleman friend, I gazed down the row of tables. Here and there, people were having lunch; they were casually dressed in the fashions of the period, the women wearing long dresses, the men in light cotton jackets. Upper middle-class Parisians, out for a weekend in the country: a morning spent rowing upon the Seine, followed by a leisurely lunch at the Fournaise. Chatting amongst themselves, they paid little attention to me.

At the far end of the balcony, an artist's easel had been set up. It held a large canvas, nearly two meters long by a meter-and-a-half wide; behind it were two tables, both set with plates, glasses, platters of grapes, and several bottles of wine, yet oddly vacant, as if a large party had recently been seated there, then suddenly vanished. Only two men were present: both in sleeveless white undershirts, each sporting a yellow straw hat. They were carrying on a conversation, one leaning against the railing with his back to the river, the other sitting on a wooden chair turned backward to the nearer of the two tables.

I knew who they were, of course, from my prior research. The man at the railing, the one with the beard: Alphonse Fournaise, the son of the restaurant's owner. And the younger man sitting nearby — that would be Gustave Caillebotte, an excellent painter in his own right, not to mention a wealthy patron of the arts who'd helped support many of his friends by buying their works, even when no one else would. Yet the artist himself was nowhere to be seen; he'd disappeared, leaving behind only a palette and a clay jar holding several damp brushes.

Here was my chance. Rising from my seat, I casually strolled down the balcony, my hands clasped behind my back, pretending to be idly curious. Neither man took notice of me as I drew closer.

The painting was still incomplete, but nonetheless it was immediately recognizable. More than a hundred years later, conservators at the Phillips Collection would submit the finished work to X-ray examination, and discover a charcoal undersketch beneath the surface, much like the first draft of a novel that had not been entirely erased during subsequent

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revisions. That was what I saw now: black-and-white drawings of figures, lacking definition, seated at the tables or standing in the background, like the ghostly afterimages of men and women who'd long since left the scene.

Yet the artist had begun to use his oils to fill in the details. At the right side of the painting, two men spoke to a woman in a black dress who cupped her ears with gloved hands, as if hearing an indecent comment she didn't appreciate. In the foreground to the left, a pretty girl played with an English terrier she'd put upon the table. Behind her, Alphonse leaned against the balcony, gazing in the direction of the woman with her hands against her ears; Alphonse struck that same pose even now, and it was then that I realized that the artist had been at work on his portraiture just before he'd left the easel.

The rest of the scene, however, still existed only as a rough sketch. There were charcoal smears here and there upon the canvas, where the artist had carefully adjusted postures, making one man in the far background a little shorter than the other, turning another woman's face toward the artist instead of away. And, yes, just as art historians suspected, the awning was missing; it would be added later, perhaps in the last stage of composition, to add a subtle balance to the painting. Seeing this, I couldn't help but smile. There was another sailboat on the Seine that would never be seen....

"Pardon, madam?" Alphonse had finally noticed me. "You find something amusing?"

"No, no...not at all." I hastily stepped back from the canvas. "I was...I was simply admiring, that's all."

He scowled at me, but Gustave grinned. "You like this?" he asked, half-turning in his chair to gaze at me. "It pleases you?" When I nodded, he looked back at his companion. "See? Just as I told you. The hell with the Solon. Art is meant for the people...."

"Explain that to Zola." Alphonse folded his arms across his chest. Until now, I hadn't realized just how muscular he was. He might not have been very handsome but, I had to admit, he had a nice body. "Claims that you and colleagues haven't produced any great work. Did you read what that idiot wrote about Claude's last show...?"

"Hush. Don't let Pierre-Auguste hear that." Gustave glanced at me

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again. "Don't mind us. We're just here to sit for a friend. He's gone off to answer the call of nature...."

"And I wish he'd hurry." Alphonse rolled his eyes in disgust. "How long does it take him to piss, anyway?"

I'm sure I blushed, but it wasn't because of the indelicacy of his remark. One by one, Pierre-Auguste's friends had come to this balcony, to pose for hours on end while he added their likenesses to his painting. The scene itself might have been imaginary, but the people in it were real. Even looking at the rough sketch, I could name them all. The actress Ellen Andree. The Baron Raoul Barbier. Charles Ephrussi, the editor of the *Gazette des beaux-arts*. Models and writers, journalists and politicians. Even his fiancée, Aline Charigot, who'd brought along her small dog.

He hadn't painted this scene all at once, though, but had brought them in for individual sittings, one or two at a time. It had taken weeks, perhaps months to get this far. And when he was away from the canvas, what they'd said behind his back....

Suddenly, a door opened behind me, "Alphonse, where's your damned sister? She was supposed to be here by now."

Looking around, I saw a young man walk out onto the balcony. Slender, of average height, he had deep-set eyes and a trim goatee that was beginning to grow bushy at the chin. His white smock was flecked with daubs of paint, and his face was almost as red as the pigments on his fingernails.

"I have no idea." Alphonse removed his hat to wipe sweat from his forehead. "I told her that today was her turn, that she wasn't to be late...."

"Oh, for God's sake." Striding past me with scarcely a glance in my direction, Pierre-August walked to the railing, held a hand up against the sun as he gazed up at the sky. "I'm losing the light. What does she expect me to do, finish this in the studio?"

"Well, you could...." Catching the irate expression on his friend's face, Gustave wisely stopped himself. "I'm here. Go ahead and paint me. I've got nothing else to...."

"No. I'm sorry, but not yet. I...." Turning away from the railing, Pierre-Auguste clenched his fists in frustration. "I can't work that way," he said, patiently trying to articulate his thoughts. "There's a certain form, a certain process. Left to right, understand? I've already had to

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compromise once with Paul, Jeanne, and Eugene.... I don't want to have to do it again."

Alphonse shrugged. "Well, look, the table's all set up." He gestured to the wine bottles, glasses and plates on the table between him and Gustave. "That's easy enough. You're finished with me. Now you could...."

"No! I wanted Alphonsine to be here today! I told her to be here, and now...."

"Well, then, damn it," Gustave said, "if you can't get Alphonsine, use her instead."

And then he pointed to me.

I promise, I swear, I totally insist...if I could have cut and run, I would have done so. All I had to do was back away, claim that I had another engagement, find some sort of excuse....

But I didn't. To this day, I don't know why. Maybe I was caught up in the moment. Perhaps it was only vanity. It might have even been because this was the way history intended it to be. I don't necessarily believe in predestination, yet nonetheless you have to take it into consideration. It may have been that I was simply meant to be there.

In any case, I didn't refuse. Pierre-Auguste was peeved that his chosen model didn't show up when she was supposed to, so he turned to the nearest woman he could find. I went to the railing and struck the pose that he'd intended for Alphonsine in his charcoal sketch: leaning forward, with my right hand cupping my face and my left arm draped across the railing, my eyes turned toward the empty chair where the Baron would be seated. Alphonse stood nearby, glaring at me because I'd taken his sister's place in the composition. Gustave drank wine and told raunchy stories about various members of Parisian high society that made it difficult for me to maintain the coy smile that Pierre-Auguste wanted.

The session lasted most of the afternoon. When it was over, the artist offered to pay me a fee for my services. I demurred, however, and beat it out of there before anyone thought to ask my name. The maître'd was a little surprised that I left before my lunch companion arrived, but I suppose that it wasn't the first time he'd seen a girl stood up by a date.

And that's how I came to be in *The Luncheon of the Boating Party*, considered today to be one of the great works of the Impressionist period. Some art books state that the young lady in the middle-background is

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Alphonsine Fournaise, while others say that she's an "unidentified woman." Commissioner Sanchez was furious with me when I returned to the twenty-fourth century, and after the Review Board completed its investigation, I was no longer allowed to participate in historical missions for the CRC.

To be honest, though, it matters little to me. It's a magnificent piece, and I like to think that I was a better model than Alphonsine. And now I know what it was like to pose for a painting during a summer afternoon in a restaurant near Chatou and, for just a little while, to gaze into the eyes of Renoir. ₮

—for Elizabeth Steele

"Sorry, but no potential weapons are allowed."

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Perhaps some of you remember Michael Blumlein's "Bestseller" (Feb. 1990) with its suggestion that a writer's success need cost only an arm and a leg (or maybe an organ). Now Robert Reed offers his own take on the subject of writerly success, a fairy tale worthy of the Brothers Grimm.

The Cure

By Robert Reed

FRANCIS HOLIDAY HAD always been a mid-list author, which meant he was a marginal author — one of a multitude of competent and sometimes more than competent wordsmiths who eke out a livelihood on the fringes of the publishing world. In a professional life spanning three decades, Francis had written twenty novels and published thirteen of those, acquiring a string of mostly favorable reviews as well as a puddle of fans whose chief complaint was that his work was never in print for long. Two ex-wives shared similar critiques when it came to his success, or the lack of it. There also was a grown son who hadn't spoken to his father in years and a twelve-year-old daughter who barely knew the man, and as a consequence, worshipped him. The most stable presence in Francis's life was his agent, an overworked gentleman who was considered something of a patron saint to mid-list authors. But their relationship came to a gruesome end while the agent was arguing with a particularly notorious editor, shouting at his cell phone as he stepped into a busy crosswalk, and a gypsy cab driven by a partially blind Serb swept

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him off his feet, leaving his hip shattered and his brain in a vegetative state.

For the second time in his professional life, Francis needed to find a literary representative. The search consumed several months and was complicated by indifference and outright rudeness from various candidates. Clare Manning was the best choice available among those who showed interest in his flickering career. A pudgy young woman with zeal and inexperience, a positive attitude and poor organizational skills, Clare worked for one of the big agencies — a situation that brought blessings as well as trouble. When they first spoke on the phone, she told her would-be client that she was a great, great fan of his, though she was familiar with only two of Francis's books. Later, when she couldn't sell his newest work to the handful of major publishers, she called him with the bad news, punctuating the conversation with praise for his talent and hope for the future. "We'll get them with the next book," she promised. And then some minutes later, using a different voice — a stern, almost parental tone — she added, "It would nice, Francis, really delicious, if you came up with something a bit more commercial."

Too polite to scream, Francis simply muttered, "We'll see." His anger smoldered long after the conversation was finished. How could she just dismiss seven months of hard work? Where did she get the rocks to give *him* writing advice? Muttering curses didn't help. What Francis needed was to clear his mind, and where earlier generations of authors would have gotten drunk, he launched himself on a round of brutal exercise. Francis was a swimmer of some skill, and the local college had a serviceable indoor pool. Dónning a Lycra suit and goggles, he relentlessly pushed his aging body up and down the open lanes, three hours invested into a mind-numbing and thoroughly blissful exhaustion.

But water slipped into his right ear, and a painful sinus infection blossomed inside his skull, leaving Francis with a raging headache and partial deafness. He ended up sitting in bed, popping pain pills and antibiotics, feeling too sick to do anything but pull the curtains closed and watch television with the sound roaring.

As luck had it, one of the big national telethons was in progress that weekend. Second-tier performers and plaintive victims paraded across the screen, while millions of dollars flooded into grateful coffers. Watching

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the spectacle, Francis had a sudden insight. An inspiration. But as any good writer knows, the inspiration doesn't count for much; it's what you do with the gift. After hard consideration and a good deal of self-doubt, he decided not to throw the idea away. Instead, he invested the next week working out the dynamics of a thriller and writing the first three drafts of a proposal that he eventually sent to his agent by e-mail. But Clare was never a particularly organized soul, and she didn't find time to read his work until several weeks later. By then, Francis had moved on to a new project. When Clare called, he was swimming laps at the pool. She left a message on his machine, a breathless sweet and worshipful voice saying, "Thank you, Francis. For sending me *The Cure*, thank you. Thank you. I can do business with this. We can do business. Great things coming!"

BUT NOTHING is easy in publishing, particularly when real money is involved. Before any editor could see the proposal, it was rewritten several times again. The first revision was because Clare asked for minor changes, and the next two were because the higher-ups in her company felt it needed some "major fine-tuning," whatever that meant. Francis gave them what they wanted, though he would tweak other areas of the storyline, making the work more appealing to his sensibilities while keeping his pride intact. But still Clare had her quibbles. "You know, I'd have an easier time selling this if I could have a few chapters. Just to show everyone the good work you do." Luckily Francis had to keep busy somehow, waiting for his agent to digest each improved proposal. The first hundred pages had been roughed into shape already. But Clare returned the manuscript with fresh complaints about his style and his characters. "You need to make your book more appealing to readers," she argued. And Francis did this the simplest way he knew — he made every person in the novel physically attractive and a little bit stupid, and he made his protagonist speak with clichés peppered with occasional sarcastic phrases — the hallmark of humor in the modern world.

Several months later, *The Cure* garnered a high six-figure advance for North American hard/soft rights. Francis and Clare might have enjoyed a larger payday, but the industry knew his track record and didn't want more exposure. The final version was written over the course of five

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months, and it was accepted with only minor touches from the copyeditors. Foreign sales and a lush Hollywood deal were what made Francis into a millionaire, and healthy sales eventually brought the author a string of royalty checks that still left him trembling whenever he opened mail from his agent.

"What we need to do now, Francis, is help you reach the next level. Reach it and stay there, and in the process, make you into a household name."

Talbot Jensen owned the agency for which Clare worked. He was a precise little man with soft hands and a winning smile, a spacious home in the Hamptons, and a luxury apartment overlooking Central Park. Botox and synthetic hair helped him look fifty, and his classic dark suit gave the impression of comfortable, effortless wealth. It was hard to believe that the man sitting beside Francis, eating salad greens and sipping mineral water, had come from Indiana and began his professional life in the mailroom at *Popular Mechanics*. But that was the story, and even half a century later, the old warhorse retained something of the old hunger and hard practicalities that had made him into a major player in the relatively tiny world of publishing.

"A household name?" Francis asked. "Are you serious?"

Talbot offered three names familiar to readers and nonreaders alike. Then with the same tone, he said, "And now, Francis Holiday. How does that sound to you?"

Clare was sporting a broad, supportive smile. But which man was she backing? Francis or her boss?

"A household name, huh?" Feeling like a bear must feel when it plays with a baited trap, Francis admitted, "I've never really given that possibility much consideration."

Talbot acted astonished. "Never? A man with your imagination? You've never entertained the possibility of huge professional successes?"

As a daydream. On occasion, yes. But he was a busy writer, and he had invested many more hours thinking of new ways to kill people, or at least to torture them with emotional conundrums and dramatic tragedies.

Francis glanced across the table, meeting Clare's gaze.

"We've been discussing several possible stories," she mentioned to

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Talbot. "Some storylines. General premises." Then she winked at her number-one author, promising, "We've got some good starting ideas."

A person didn't have to be a paranoid to see the machinations. But it helped. Francis knew that Talbot would have seen all of the preliminary proposals. They weren't fooling anyone with this odd theater of theirs. Obviously, the dinner was a setup — an orchestrated attempt to coax a difficult employee into shaping up. Francis had heard of such things, but the only pleasure in this experience was the ego-boost that so much interest was being thrown his way.

Finally, the old man turned to Francis, bluntly asking the same obvious question that hundreds of others had asked over the last eighteen months. "What will you do now to follow up *The Cure*?"

Francis mentioned one favorite project.

Talbot acted hurt, shaking his head sadly for a moment. "But that book, as good as it sounds, doesn't have an idea that people will find intriguing."

"An idea," Francis repeated.

"I know, I know," Talbot said. "It seems like a harsh judgment. But the entertainment world today...as unfair as it seems...it demands work that brings clarity as well as genius. A proposition that stands out from every other book on the shelf. In other words, exactly what your brilliant bestseller has managed to achieve."

It was difficult to ignore those glowing words, even when Francis knew he was being scammed.

The author stared at his own salad, pulling together his thoughts.

Clare began to say a few encouraging words. To her author, or more likely, to Talbot.

Francis interrupted before she could finish the first sentence. "Wait," he snapped, lifting a hand and breathing deeply. "Just give me a moment here, would you please?"

The backers of his professional life sat quietly but not patiently.

"You want a proposition that stands out," Francis began. "Your words, and everyone else's. 'Stands out.' You need something very easy to understand — a high concept — that embodies other standard qualities too. Likable characters. Happy endings. And of course, effective writing scrupulously wiped clean of most fingerprints. You know, the usual

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authorial touches that made Faulkner Faulkner and Hemingway Ernest." Francis laughed for a moment, and then named three other authors, watching Clare's expression change from studious silence to outright puzzlement.

The last two years had been very good to his agent. A personal trainer and two cosmetic surgeries had made her into a pretty young woman. There had been moments — passing ones — when Francis wondered if she might be interested in an old boat like him. But then he had heard the rumors — reliable tales from several sources — that she preferred her men to be even older, which was why she was working so very hard to keep Talbot happy.

"You don't know those names, do you?" Francis asked.

Clare had to shake her head. "Should I?" she asked.

The old man almost grimaced. "They had their day, those souls. Bestsellers before you were born."

"Household names," Francis added.

But Talbot had a big bullet or two waiting to be fired. He looked at his difficult writer, and then with a careful voice that only sounded as if it was caring, he said, "Maybe they aren't remembered today. But those authors were able to support their children. Unlike most of the pretentious souls who sell a few thousand books in a good year."

You bastard, Francis thought.

But in the next moment, he understood that the bastard was telling the honest truth.

Francis and his son had patched up their relationship over these last years. Money helped, as it can. Jeff had a significant drug problem that required two extended stays in the best rehab centers, and he came out the last time sober and devoted to his famous father. The daughter's evolution proved slower, and in general, it moved in the opposite direction. The worshipful twelve-year-old had turned into a determined and very smart seventeen-year-old who took pride in being someone besides Francis Holiday's daughter. Her name was Georgia, but she wanted to be called Tally for some hard-to-explain reason.

Francis took his children to Hollywood, to accompany him to the publicity events for *The Cure* movie. The premiere was in another two

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weeks, at the height of the summer blockbuster season. In the midst of that chaos, between signing autographs and fending off the worst of his fans, Francis caught his daughter reading the electronic version of his novel.

Jokingly, he asked, "Don't you know how it ends?"

Tally was a serious young woman. She was complicated and tightly strung, and she was too plain and far too smart to be cast in a popular movie. With a grim shake of the head, she said, "I haven't read this in several years, Dad."

Had it been that long? She would have been fourteen when the novel came out, and now his little girl was nearly eighteen.

Francis winked at her. And without reasonable caution, he asked, "What do you think about the book?"

Tally looked up at him, blanking the reader.

Then with a slow, careful voice, she admitted, "I've got some real problems with it, Dad. I just do."

Overhearing them, Jeff instantly jumped into the fray. "What kind of problems? What? It's a great book. It's fun and exciting, and when you find out who's really behind the plot — "

"The Muscular Wasting Society," she interjected.

"The Society. Yeah. What a bunch of evil shits." Jeff laughed and shook his head, pleased to tell his father, "I've read it three times now. And I loved every word."

Francis nodded, uneasy for many reasons.

"Dad," Tally continued. "I'm sorry, but you've written better. That book about our grandfather and his life, for example."

A little book, it was. And it had sold like a little book.

"Why don't you write more like that?" she asked.

He didn't want to explain his industry just now. Instead he steered back to the topic at hand. "What exactly is wrong with this book? Besides the writing, I mean."

She took a breath and held it.

Her half-brother shook a finger at her. "Why are you doing this — ?"

"So these evil people create a disease," Tally interrupted. "It's an awful, long-term disease, always fatal, and they make fortunes by holding telethons to raise money to find a cure. And in the meantime, they hold

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patents on a string of very expensive medicines that can lessen the symptoms. So they make more billions doing that. But all the time, they have the real cure sitting in a vault guarded by a private army — "

"He knows the damn story," Jeff shouted.

Tally looked only at her father, her expression sorry but determined. "It's a stupid, cynical story. And I don't like it at all."

Writers have methods to survive bad reviews — tricks learned from a lifetime of accepting sucker punches. But it was a hard job, holding his poise and keeping his voice level as Francis mentioned to his daughter, "It's just a story, honey."

"But it isn't," she replied. Then she pulled up a recent article from a Web magazine, ready for his complaint. "Do you see, Dad? Look! Since *The Cure* was published, contributions to established causes like MS are down five percent. And AIDS giving has slid more than ten percent."

"So what?" Jeff asked. "You can't suggest — "

"Quiet," Francis said to his son. Then he turned back to Tally, saying, "Thanks, honey. But I think you're overrating your old man's power to influence the masses."

She sighed and looked away.

Jeff was ready to slap her.

"It isn't just you, Dad. It's the business you're in. Hollywood and thriller novels, all of that. They use these simple, stupid ideas for stories, and there's always got to be some good guy and a very bad guy, and there has to be a happy ending that isn't really happy or finished either. Not if you think about it. I mean, in your book, your hero kills the bad guy and then gives the world the cure for this awful disease."

"And that's not happy?" Jeff asked.

"It wouldn't be for a lot of people," she maintained. "The disease was a fake in the first place, and when the world learns the truth, what's going to happen to the friends and families of the dead? It wasn't just bad luck or God's will that killed their mother or their son. It was vicious murder on a vast scale. Like the Holocaust was. And just knowing that is going to keep the pain fresh for the rest of their lives."

Her brother rolled his eyes.

"I do like happy endings, Dad. But they have to make sense. I'm sorry. But when your bad guy pulls a knife on the hero...well, that's what the

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evildoers always do. They always get beaten and bloody in a fair fight, but then they find some knife or convenient gun, giving the good guy a noble reason to shoot them in the head. But really, does that make sense? If you're a genius who built this international organization and acquired all these billions of dollars, should I really believe that you'd be stupid enough to pull a knife out of your boot and get killed for your trouble? No. What you'd do is get yourself a team of attorneys. You'd hire a publicity agent. You'd drag things out in the courts, and the honest novel would dribble along for another ten years.

"Dad," said Tally. "These are the most decent people in the world. Those who run the charities, who want to cure these horrible diseases. And what are you accomplishing? Besides making money, I mean. You're teaching an audience to be cynical about some very good people. Which is exactly what every other cynical, money-hungry author has done with just about every other profession that you can think of."

Francis stared at the revelation sitting before him.

And just then, slowly, a wide smile broke across his face.

An excerpt from THE PLOT — A PROPOSAL:

> Cash MacDaniels, Jr. has followed the evidence to this nondescript office door. Beyond that simple brass knob waits the ringleader of an international conspiracy. One faceless, nameless individual oversees a vast empire with a single nefarious purpose — to destroy the public's capacity to trust in authority. Television has played its role in the process, as have motion pictures. Popular novels and politically correct textbooks, and of course, the Internet have also made their marks felt. Every media outlet is another finger in the conspiracy's giant hand. Each finger works to dispel humanity's faith in government and religion, in science and rational thought. To what end? The enemy wants to create a desperate world where no citizen believes in any of the old institutions. And when the time is right, that enemy will step into public

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view, using their powers of propaganda and mass-manipulation to fill the power vacuum, to take control of the entire "Free" world.

Who is the ringleader? Cash asks himself.

Then he turns the brass knob and opens the door.

A firm, malevolent voice says, "Hello, son."

Cash MacDaniels, Sr. stands behind a small, tidy desk. Clutched in his right hand is a 9 mm automatic pistol. The empty hand beckons. "A little closer now, son," says the tall, handsome elderly man. "But not too close. I don't want to have to kill you, at least not yet."

A ROYALTY CHECK arrived with the morning mail. Francis felt the usual excitement as he tore open the envelope, and he was heartened to see the amount — not as rich as some checks, but better than the last few. *The Cure* movie had given his old book a meaningful boost. But he understood that this peak would soon pass, which was why he immediately put in another call to Clare's office.

This time he managed to catch her.

"Francis," Clare said, her voice louder and cheerier than ever. "I was just thinking about you."

"But what do you think about *The Plot*?" he blurted. "Have you gotten a chance to look it over yet?"

"I did, I did. Last week, in fact."

And why didn't you call me? he wondered. But instead, Francis simply held his tongue, waiting.

"It's wonderful," she said. "Very interesting, very compelling."

"I'm glad you think so — "

"In fact, it's on Talbot's desk now," she said, her voice picking up volume and velocity. "Soon, maybe in a day or two, I'll get back to you. But I really think we can do some good business with this. Okay, Francis?"

"Sure."

"And I'm sorry, but I've got to go. I've got another appointment, Francis."

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"Well, then," he said. "Go."

"Good. Thanks."

The author felt better for a moment or two, and then a strange disquiet grabbed hold of him. When this mood hit, he knew that his best response was to swim. So he went down to the indoor pool that he had built along with this house, changing into trunks and fitting a new pair of goggles over his eyes and a cap over what remained of his hair. A man was working at the far end of the pool, cleaning the bottom with a hose fixed to a long handle. Francis didn't recognize him — a burly fellow with bony hands and an all-business attitude. But the pool service was always changing people, which was why he didn't think twice about sliding into the warm water.

The man was scrubbing the deepest part of the pool as Francis swam up to the wall, flipping his legs over and kicking off again.

When Francis returned, the pool man was still scrubbing the same tiny portion of the bottom.

And with the third lap too.

Then came the fourth lap, and Francis realized that the hose hadn't moved at all. Stopping short of the wall, he treaded water and looked at the now-empty deck. Where was the big fellow? Standing at the end of the little diving board, wearing nothing at all. He was a strong young man who appeared to have no body hair, and despite a huge smile, he retained his all-business attitude.

"What are you doing?" Francis asked.

The smile brightened, and then the stranger said, "You ought to know."

Francis turned and kicked, and he flung his arms...but even as he fought to swim his way into shallow water, he heard the diving board bounce, and then came the sense of darkness descending on top of him, ready to push the life out of his flailing, helpless body....

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Gardner Dozois is the author of Strangers *and several collections of short stories, including* The Visible Man, Geodesic Dreams, Strange Days, Slow Dancing through Time *and a book of interviews conducted by Michael Swanwick,* Being Gardner Dozois. *Of course, as most enthusiasts of science fiction know, Mr. Dozois is also one of our field's preeminent editors, best known for his two decades of editing* Asimov's *and for his many anthologies. His most recent projects include* Galileo's Children, *a collection of stories exploring the issue of science vs. superstition, and* Robots *(coedited with Jack Dann).*

"When the Great Days Came" examines the future from an unusual viewpoint.

When the Great Days Came

By Gardner Dozois

THE RAT SLUNK DOWN THE dark alley, keeping close to the comforting bulk of the brick wall of an abandoned warehouse, following scent trails that it and thousands of its kind had laid down countless times before. It stopped to snatch up a cockroach, crunching it in its strong jaws, and to sniff at a frozen patch of garbage, and then scurried on. Above it, the stars shone bright and cold where a patch of night sky looked down into the deep stone canyon of the alleyway.

It was in an alley near 10th and Broadway, in New York City, although the human terms meant nothing to it, but as far as the world it lived in and the kind of life it led in that world was concerned, it would have made very little difference if it had been in any big city in the world.

It's tempting to give the rat an anthropomorphic humanized name like Sleektail or Sharptooth or Longwhiskers, but in fact the only "name" it had was a scent-signature composed of pheromones and excretions from its scent-glands, the tang of its breath, and the hot rich smell of its anus; so it had no name that could be even approximately rendered in human

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terms, nor would the human concept of a name, with all the freight of implications that go with it, have meant anything to it.

The rat emerged from the alley, and shrank back as a car flashed by in a sudden burst of light and wind and the perception of hurtling mass, and a stink of rubber and burning gasoline you could smell coming blocks away. One of its litter-mates had been killed by one of these monsters back in the summer, almost half a lifetime ago, and the rat had been wary of them ever since. When the car had passed, leaving the night quiet again in its wake, the rat reared up to sniff the air for a moment, then lowered itself down to follow the curb, keeping its shoulder brushing against it as it ran.

At the corner of a side street, an inch-wide hole had been gnawed under one of the concrete sidewalk slabs. The rat paused to collapse its skeleton and change the shape of its head, and then squeezed through the hole into the tunnel beyond.

(It wouldn't do to leave you with the impression that there was anything unusual about this. The rat wasn't a mutant or a shapeshifting alien — it was just a rat. All of its millions of brethren had this ability, as did many other rodents, their skulls not being plated together like those of other mammals, so that they could squeeze themselves through an opening three-quarters of an inch wide, or smaller, depending on the size of the rat.)

Once under the sidewalk, the rat entered a world that humans never saw, and which they couldn't have accessed even if they knew about it: a three-dimensional space wrapped in a madly complex skein around and under and *within* the human world, like something from an Escher print, a world composed of spaces and tunnels under the sidewalks and streets, of subway tunnels (some of them, including whole lost stations, abandoned for almost a hundred years), of forgotten basements and sub-basements and sub-sub-basements, of ineffectually boarded-up warehouses and decaying brownstones, of sewers, of service tunnels through which ran pipes conveying steam or water or electricity or gas, of alleys and trash-strewn tenement backyards, of disused pipes at construction sites, of runways through the bushes and deep tangled undergrowth of urban parks and squares, of the maze of low roofs and crumbling chimneys that broke around the flanks of newer skyscrapers like a scummy brick-and-tarpaper

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surf (although the lordly skyscrapers too had places visited by rats, in the deep roots of the buildings where humans seldom went), and of the crawlspaces between floors and under the floorboards and inside the walls of almost every building in the city. The rat rarely ventured more than a few blocks from its burrow, but if it had wanted to, it could have traveled from tunnel to chamber to tunnel — ducking out from a crack in a foundation, up a drain-spout, across a roof, in again at a sewer grate — all the way across Manhattan to the Bronx and back to Brooklyn without ever coming out into the open air for more than a few seconds at a time.

Now it followed a narrow tunnel down to a widened-out chamber lined with torn-up newspapers and trash bags and shopping bags, the place where it and a dozen of its brothers and sisters had been born, and where it still slept many nights with an assortment of other bachelors. It would be anthropomorphizing again to ascribe human feelings of sentiment or nostalgia to the rat, although as it paused to sniff the heavy, cloying odors of the burrow, perhaps it's not too much to suggest that it gained some comfort or a feeling of momentary security from the long-familiar scents. Then it was off again, down another, longer tunnel that led out, from a hole behind a drainspout, into another alley.

It wasn't looking for anything in particular — it was just *looking*. It had spent most of the nights of its life like this, restlessly pacing from place to place to place within its range, with no particular goal or destination in mind, but instantly ready to take advantage of whatever opportunities it came across on the way.

The rat stopped to lap up some Coke from a tossed-out soft-drink cup, relishing the sudden sharp sweetness, then ducked into a building through a hole gnawed in the molding, and into the dusty maze of crawlspaces between floors and ceilings, and behind walls. Whiskers twitching with sudden interest, it followed the scent of a receptive female, and found her among long-shuttered boxes and shrouded furniture in an attic, but a bigger rat — a veteran almost two years old — had found her first and was already mounting her. The bigger rat growled at him over her back without missing a stroke, showing yellowed fangs, and, resentfully, the rat retreated, back into the interior spaces between walls, then out onto a roof in the cold night air.

There was a smell of cat here, and while the rat wasn't too worried

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about cats (few of whom would tackle a full-grown rat), caution prompted it to move on anyway. It ghosted across a roof, across a connecting roof, and then into a space left where a brick had fallen out of a long-dead chimney. Down the chimney shaft to a fireplace which had had a sheet of tin clumsily nailed over it decades before, out through one sagging corner, and into a room filled with the ghostly, sheet-covered hulks of crumbling, mildewed Victorian furniture — the kind of place, if this were a fantasy, where it might have stopped to consult with a wise old Rat King tied tail to tail to tail, but which in reality contained only the crisscrossing traceries of tiny footprints in the deep dust of the floor. Into a hole in the kitchen baseboard, out into an enclosed tenement yard cluttered with broken chairs and an overturned swing set, all buried in weeds, out under the bottom of a board fence, and into another dank alley, following now the enticing scent of food.

This was prime scavenging territory, an alley behind a block that contained three or four restaurants and fast-food places, always filled with easily gnawed-through green trash bags and overflowing metal garbage barrels. The rat sniffed around the barrels, nosed half a gnawed hot-dog and some Cheese Doodles out from under a clutter of plastic trash and cans, swallowed the food hurriedly, and then found a real prize: a discarded pizza box with two pieces of pizza still inside.

Most rats love pizza, and this rat was no exception. It had just settled down contentedly to gnaw on a slice of Sicilian when a wave of alien stink and the clatter of heavy, clumsy footsteps told it that a human was coming. And there it was, lumbering ponderously down the alley, a vast, shambling giant that seemed to tower impossibly into the sky.

For a moment, the rat held its position defiantly astride the pizza box, but then the human spotted it and yelled something at it in its huge, blaring, bellowing voice.

The resentment the rat had felt when it had been chased away from the willing female earlier returned, sharper and hotter and fiercer than ever. The rat was an exceptionally bright rat, but, of course, it was just a rat, and so it didn't have the words, or the concepts that grew from the words, to articulate the feelings that roiled within it. If it *had* had the words, it might almost have been able, for a flickering moment, to dream of a world where things were different, a day when rats didn't have to give

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way to humans, when they could go where they wanted to go and do what they wanted to do without having to scurry away and hide whenever a human came near.

But it didn't have the words, and so the vision it had almost grasped guttered and died without ever quite coming into full focus, leaving only the tiniest smoky shard of itself behind in its mind.

The rat stood its ground for a second longer, an act of almost insane bravery in its own context, but then the human bellowed again and threw a bottle at it, and the rat darted away, leaving the prize behind, vanishing instantly behind the garbage barrels and away unseen down the alley, keeping to the shadows.

As Fate would have it, it was the very same rat, an hour later, up on another tarpaper tenement roof, sniffing at a box of Moo Shu Pork spilling out of a green trash bag that the tenants had been too lazy to take downstairs to the curb, who saw a trail of fire cut suddenly across the winter sky, and who reared up on its hind legs in time to see the glowing disk of the six-mile-wide asteroid pass over the city, on its way to a collision with a hillside north of Chibougamau in Northern Quebec.

The rat watched, sitting back on its haunches, as the glowing thing passed below the horizon. A moment later, the northern sky turned red, a glow that spread from horizon to horizon east to west, as if the sun were coming up in the wrong place, and then a bright pillar of fire climbed up over the horizon, and grew and grew and grew. Already the blast-front of the impact was rushing over the ground toward the city at close to a thousand miles per hour, a blow that would ultimately wipe the human race as well as the rat itself and most — but not *all* — of its kin off the face of the Earth.

Moments from death, the rat had no way to know it, but — after a pause for millions of years of evolution, and for radiating out to fill soon-to-be-vacated ecological niches — its day had come round at last.

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Nothing to Fear but Books Themselves

"I was the type of kid who slept on the floor of her parents' bedroom until she was 10. I waste money, not to mention natural resources, by leaving multiple lights on at night, and have somehow never gotten accustomed to the shadows lurking behind my bedroom door.... Stewart O'Nan is my worst nightmare: a genuinely scary novelist whose books are impossible to dismiss as genre fiction.... [His new novel is] so sympathetically imagined that it makes the world outside the book feel insubstantial and false."

— Nell Freudenberger, "'The Good Wife': Spouse Arrest," *The New York Times Book Review*, May 8, 2005.

WHEN THE doorbell rang, I jumped right out of my seat in front of the computer, where I had been unproductively and quakingly ensconced for the past several hours.

Before I knew what I was doing, I found myself cowering behind the couch.

"Who — who — who's there?" I called out in a quavering voice.

"Della, it's me, Fulton Basilicos, your editor."

"Your voice sounds like Fulton's, but how can I be sure it's really you?"

"You're three days late with your review of Vinca Ravenhill's novel, *Love's Adversary*, and I'm here to find out why!"

That was Fulton, all right. I got up and advanced to the door.

"Is there anyone with you, or lurking nearby?"

"No! Now let me in, dammit!"

I undid the several locks and multiple chains on the door, and cracked it just wide enough for Fulton to slide in. Once my editor was safely inside, I hastened to make my house impregnable once more.

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Finished with that time-consuming but essential procedure, I turned to face Fulton.

The editor of the most prestigious review forum in the nation was known throughout the publishing industry for his genial attitude and charity toward reviewers. But none of that famous amiability was on display now. Fulton's long, homely, distinguished face exhibited a mix of disappointment, confusion and resignation.

I felt really awful that I had let Fulton down so badly, but I truly had no choice in the matter.

It was all the fault of the books.

My editor studied me silently for a while before finally speaking as gently as his turbulent emotions allowed.

"Della, what's the problem this time? I thought we had resolved all your phobias regarding which books you could and could not review. Surely you're not finding anything frightening in Ravenhill's novel, are you? It's just a typical bodice-ripper — "

I flinched. "Please, Fulton, watch your language! The very notion of some hairy, bare-chested pirate or duke ripping a woman's shirt off — My head is swimming!"

Fulton took a seat, and so did I, grateful for the chance to regain my shattered equilibrium.

"I just don't understand you anymore, Della. You used to be such a fine, talented reviewer, able to handle anything from Tom Wolfe to Stephen Hawking. But now practically every book I assign you gives you the screaming fantods!"

Knowing it was useless, I still tried to explain myself. "You're aware, Fulton, that I was always a sensitive soul, easily spooked and preternaturally aware of all of life's dangers."

"I had only vague intimations of such, but yes...."

Confession was painful, but I had reached a point where I had no other option. "My psyche was always more precarious than you could have imagined.

"I spent my girlhood until age ten wearing a gauze veil across my mouth and nostrils, for fear of accidentally swallowing an insect. As you might imagine, I had few friends other than the occasional Jainist exchange student.

"In my teens, I avoided walking down sidewalks too close to buildings, for fear of falling masonry. But since walking too close to the curb invited being grazed by a crazed bicyclist, I could only follow a narrow pedestrian middle corridor that conflicted with foot-traffic in both directions.

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"When I went away to college, I wouldn't attend any lectures in rooms with fewer than four fire-exits, or above the second floor.

"My first job, as an assistant editor at St. Swithin's Books, brought me into contact with such frightening entities as the potentially eye-damaging office Xerox machine, the potentially tongue-scalding office coffeepot, and the potentially pregnancy-inducing office co-workers.

"Only a chance introduction to the self-improvement philosophies of Tony Robbins and Zane allowed me to function at all.

"In short, I was a timorous, agoraphobic basket-case who, however, had reached a workable accommodation with the outside world, thanks to a web of arcane superstitions and obsessive-compulsive rituals. And in books I found my refuge from the horrors of the mundane world.

"And then you shattered my protected little universe by having me review Stewart O'Nan."

"O'Nan? What happened with O'Nan?"

"Surely you recall my review of his novel, how horrifying I found it, and how it rendered the real world 'insubstantial and false'? Well, consider my predicament at that point. If the real world, which I had always dreaded, was inferior to the world created by a supreme novelist such as O'Nan, then every book became a potential gateway to hell for me, its contents a thousand times more terrifying than the physical things I had always feared. It didn't matter that most authors didn't have O'Nan's talents. I rapidly reached the point where words on a page were infinitely more scary than anything I could ever meet in real life."

Fulton meditatively pulled at his patrician chin. "So I guess assigning you the new Chuck Palahniuk novel right after O'Nan was not the best thing I could've done for your condition...?"

I awoke to the sensation of Fulton gently applying cold Dasani to my brow and delicately chafing my wrists.

"Please, Fulton, never mention the name of that degenerate perpetrator of masculine horrors ever again."

Fulton looked contrite. "Then I truly erred in giving you the latest Cormac McCarthy, followed by that child-abuse memoir, the Holocaust remembrance and the Abu Ghraib chronicle — "

Gasping for breath, I said, "Please, don't speak — of those — any more — "

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Fulton stood and began pacing. "Well, I suspected something along these lines, although I couldn't have put the phenomenon into words before hearing you explain yourself. Fascinating thing. Can't say I've ever heard the like before. Naturally, once I nebulously cottoned to your quandry, I began assigning you more, shall we say, sedate books. But apparently your heightened sensitivity found even those objectionable. Chick-lit novels — "

"Oh, the quiet dateless desperation!"

" — young-adult fantasies — "

"The poignant obstacles of adolescence!"

" — cookbooks — "

"The whole bloody concept of the food chain!"

" — even children's picture books — "

"Why, oh why, was a devil such as Chris Van Allsburg ever allowed to walk the earth?!?"

" — none of these were safe enough for your super-sensitive imagination? Not even tepid romances like Ravenhill's?"

At this humiliating moment, all I could do was nod vigorously, hang my head and weep.

Fulton approached me then and laid a fatherly hand on my shoulder.

"There, there, now, Della, your plight is not irredeemable. If we could find only one category of book you could review that wouldn't scare you, then perhaps we could begin the gradual process of desensitizing you to the awful power of the printed word. But even failing such a full recovery, you could still concentrate on that one category alone, and continue your reviewing career. Now let me just think a minute — I've got it!

"We'll make you our reviewer of genre horror novels!"

I looked up, hope and gratitude blossoming in my heart.

"Nothing's less frightening than those!" he continued. "Stephen King, Dean Koontz, Clive Barker — Once their hollow words show you the utter ineffectuality of fictional scare tactics, you'll be right as rain."

Amid my tremulous fears, I sensed he had found the answer.

"Why, you'll be cocking a snook under Stewart O'Nan's nose before you know it!"

Tentatively, I asked, "Could I start slowly, with — oh, I don't know, the Library of America edition of Lovecraft?"

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Purists might want to skip ahead, because this story is not science fiction or fantasy. Though there's a bit of a speculative element to it, the story could well happen today. So what's it doing in a magazine with a title like ours? Well, it has as much adventure and as exotic a setting as anyone could ask from an SF story. The events just happen to occur here on Earth.

Incidentally, Mr. Foster says he is so jazzed about the recent discovery of ivory-billed woodpeckers in Arkansas that he doesn't care if anyone believes he wrote this story before rare birds were in the news.

The Last Akialoa

By Alan Dean Foster

THE FIRST THING LOFTGREN noticed was the rain, coalescing out of the air as mist, then sifting gently to the already sodden earth. He smiled to himself. They could hardly have expected otherwise considering they were about to enter the wettest place on Earth.

He didn't mind bringing up the rear. Fanole, their guide, was out in front, probing the feeble excuse for a trail, occasionally calling back to his two companions warnings and advice in equal measure. Behind him and just ahead of Loftgren was young Sanchez, the graduate student who had worked so long and hard to be included in the expedition. At the moment he resembled a runaway candy bar, enshrouded as he was in the transparent plastic sheets which shielded both him and his gear from the all-pervading damp.

Back down the road they had just left and four thousand feet below them lay the Kauai coast, with its warm tropical sunshine and chattering tourists and full-service hotels. Ahead lay thirty square miles of the most improbable and impenetrable terrain in the United States, if not the world. Equally remarkable, much of it was still unexplored.

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The Alakai Swamp occupied the bowl of a gigantic caldera that formed the top of the Hawaiian island of Kauai. Trade winds slamming into the flanks of its highest peak, Mt. Waialeale, were shoved upward into colder air where they were forced to drop their load of moisture day after day, month after month, year after year, with a benumbing, saturating regularity. Four hundred and eighty inches of rain a year. Six hundred and twenty-four inches in the record year of 1948. Cherapunji in India occasionally had more during the monsoon, but Cherapunji also enjoyed a dry season.

In the depths of the Alakai, the swamp in the sky, the dry season was measured in hours.

By late morning they were making their way down one of the knife-edged ridges that slice up the Alakai like razor blades planted in a pie. The forest service had hacked notches out of the solid rock, and while the going was slippery, by choosing his handholds with care, Loftgren was able to keep all but the soles of his goretex-lined boots out of the stream which tumbled down the crack in the mountain. The temperature hovered in the sixties and he was still dry and comfortable.

Fanole had warned him that no matter what he wore, he wouldn't be able to stay dry for more than a day or two. They'd laid a small wager on the matter. Thanks to the university's beneficent largess, Loftgren had been able to outfit Sanchez and himself in the latest in tropical gear, modified to take into account the fact that at this time of year temperatures in the Alakai often dropped into the forties at night.

Their guide wore comparatively little: shorts and a light cotton sweatshirt, cheap ankle-high sneakers and socks. His pack weighed more than those of his companions because he carried the tent, but that was only proper. He was being paid well for his exertions.

Loftgren hadn't really wanted to engage Fanole, but the number of men who knew anything about the deepest parts of the Alakai could be counted on the fingers of one hand, and when they found out where the ornithologist wanted to go, every one of them had turned him down. When asked why, an old half-Hawaiian, half-haole had quietly responded, "Because I want to live to enjoy my grandchildren." Fanole was the guide of choice because among the knowledgeable, only Fanole had agreed to take on the expedition.

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Such caution (fear, even) surprised Loftgren. Having carried out important field work in both Papua New Guinea and the western Amazon, he was hardly about to be intimidated by the prospect of working on Kauai, with a profusion of Sheratons and Hyatts sprawling not two hours' drive from where they'd parked the rented van. He'd been planning this trip for more than a year and had prepared himself by reading everything extant in the limited literature about the Alakai.

He'd also encountered the stories — true, apparently. About the honeymooning couple whose car had been found at the nearby Kalalau Lookout a few years ago and who had never been seen again, alive or dead. About the U.S. Geological Survey engineer who died of a heart attack three hundred yards from the summit of Mt. Waialeale in 1948 and because of the difficulty of the terrain had to be left tied to a tree until his companions could return with adequate help to bring him out. It took sixteen men three days to get his body off the mountain. About the attempt to push a road through the swamp back in the fifties. The construction crew had smashed their way into the forest and quit for the day, only to return the next morning to find their bulldozer missing. A brief search revealed that it had simply sunk out of sight.

Then there were his unsuccessful predecessors. Kinkaid of the University of Hawaii first, and two years ago, Masaki of UC Riverside. Brazen to the end, Kinkaid had gone in alone, while Masaki had wandered away from his companions one day never to be seen again. Kinkaid had been too brash for his own good and Masaki — well, it was felt that Masaki had been the victim of either bad judgment or bad luck, neither a fault to which Loftgren was heir.

It was raining harder now and he found himself having to concentrate more closely on the trail. They were off the ridge and advancing through dense forest. Uluhe and ekaha ferns grew thickly in the underbrush, and the occasional flash of brilliant red ohi'a lehua or waxy yellow-white lobelia flower flared like strobe lights among the green walls through which they were moving. Occasionally he picked out the bright orange berries of the Astelia lily gleaming amid the sodden verdure.

"Starting to get a little sloppy. Watch your step," Fanole called back to them.

An instant later Sanchez slipped off the rotting log along which he had

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been tiptoeing and plunged waist deep into thick, soupy, organic muck. Fanole edged carefully around the inadequate pathway, clinging for balance to the overhanging branches of dripping trees, and reached down to give the embarrassed student a hand up.

Beneath the transparent rain slicker the young man's water-logged jeans were now stained brown from the waist down. Shreds of bark and leaves and other unidentifiable macrobiotic matter in various stages of decomposition clung to his legs and shoes. An unsympathetic Fanole offered one of his typically terse observations.

"Warned you. In here if you don't get soaked from the top down, sooner or later you get soaked from the bottom up." With that he turned and started back up a trail that had already diminished to little more than a narrow tunnel between the trees. "Might as well get used to it!" he yelled back.

The now-saturated graduate student looked unhappy. "Sorry. I thought I could keep dry for one day, at least."

Loftgren tugged the brim of his slicker down over his forehead. His face was wet but the rest of him still held back the best efforts of the swamp to drench him. On the other hand, he was already soaked with sweat.

The Alakai was where dryness went to die.

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Julio. Both Fanole and I have a lot more experience in this kind of country than you do."

Twenty minutes later Loftgren stepped over a log and onto a seemingly solid patch of ground that turned out to consist of cloying thigh-deep sludge. Fanole and Sanchez stood off to one side, looking on as he slowly pulled himself out and worked his way through the trough. No one said a word.

By nightfall they'd reached the junction of the Pihea and Alakai trails. Here the forest service had helicoptered in thick beams and wood planks. Securely strapped together, these formed a level, solid platform at the trail juncture.

Fanole set up the tent, somehow managing to keep the interior halfway clear of rain. Beneath the extended, oversized storm flap they stripped nude and deposited their equipment outside on the redwood six-by-sixes.

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"Any other wood'd rot out inside a month," their guide pointed out unnecessarily. "Except cypress and mahogany. But we can't get cypress here, and mahogany's too expensive. So we have to import the redwood."

Using clean towels they dried themselves, then crawled into the tent to settle down around the camp stove Fanole ignited. By the time dinner was ready it was darker outside than the inside of a cave. A drenching, dripping, soaking dark. Steady rain pattered like dancing mice on the top of the tent, falling harder at night than it had during the day. Except for the monotonous thrumming of the continuous downpour — the heartbeat of the Alakai — it was dead silent outside the shelter.

Fanole poked leisurely at his reconstituted freeze-dried supper, looking on as Sanchez ravenously devoured his and Loftgren made a more considered go of his own. The guide was nearly fifty, with a receding forehead of thinning brown hair and dark eyes the color of aged bourbon that seemed to pierce whatever crossed their path, be it human or rock or tree. His sun-seared appearance left his ancestry open to some question, but he was certainly at least part Hawaiian. He had a slight bulge around his middle; spare tire for a bicycle rather than a sedan. Otherwise he was surprisingly muscular.

"You don't mind my saying so, I think you're both crazy."

Loftgren grinned. It wasn't the first time that opinion had been expressed in regards to the expedition. "You're entitled to your opinion. If you feel that way, why did you agree to guide us?"

Fanole finished the last of his dinner and set the plate carefully to one side. "Because no one else would. I know you academic types. If you couldn't get any help you'd eventually have tried it on your own." He glanced up at the roof, listening to the rain tap-dancing relentlessly outside. "You'd never have gotten out of this place alive."

"Don't bet on it," Loftgren told him. "I've been in rougher places than the Alakai. There are no snakes here, no hostile natives. Not even any dangerous bugs, and the mosquitoes quit climbing at the thirty-five-hundred-foot level."

Fanole nodded. "That's right. Nothing dangerous here but the place itself. Don't need any snakes or tigers. The swamp'll kill you all by its lonesome." He looked toward the entrance and nodded knowingly. "No landmarks, either. No sky overhead; only clouds. No ground underfoot;

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only a bottomless pit of composting plant matter. Even compasses act funny in here."

Sanchez felt compelled to speak up. "Begging your pardon, sir, but we got through the first of the bogs okay." He smiled apologetically. "Didn't stay very dry, but we got through." Reaching over, he tapped his pack. "Hard to get lost with a GPS."

Fanole shook his head once. He didn't smile. "'The first of the bogs'? We haven't even reached the bogs yet, kid. That was just muddy trail. I've personally sounded bogs here that were twenty feet deep. There are deeper still, but they ain't been plumbed yet."

"How come?"

"Nobody's ever brought in a long enough measuring probe. Remember: we're walking across the throat of an old volcano. Might be bogs a hundred feet deep. Maybe a thousand. Nobody knows. In the whole swamp there's only two barely-there east-west trails and nothing at all running north to south. Your plan is to head off-trail and follow the line of the Wainiha Pali. Nobody's ever gone in there and done that." He snorted softly. "With or without a 'GPS.'"

"Kinkaid went in," Loftgren corrected him, "and Masaki."

"Nobody knows that for certain." Fanole's eyes burned into those of the ornithologist. "Masaki got to the Kilhana lookout. Nobody's sure about Kinkaid. If you try to go north from there you've got sheer cliffs on one side and unplumbed bogs on the other. I give you *haoles* about a day before you give up on it. If we make it that far."

"I once spent a month in the highlands of New Guinea, Fanole. Don't try to scare me."

"I'm not." The guide leaned back on his light sleeping bag. "You hired me for advice. I'm giving it. Just think it's a lot to go through for a glimpse of a bird that's probably been extinct since the seventies."

"There have been reports of song-sightings since then," Sanchez pointed out. "The survivors of Masaki's party all confirm it."

Fanole rolled onto his side, propping his head up on one big, weathered palm. "You stay out here long enough, it's easy to start hearing things as well as seeing them."

"Masaki vanished while tracking a singing akialoa," Loftgren insisted stubbornly.

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"Maybe."

"Those with him heard it too. The weather and the terrain got so bad they all gave up and fell back, except Masaki. But they heard it."

"Maybe." The guide was incorrigible. "Next you'll be telling me you expect to find an o'o'a'a, too."

"No." Loftgren's voice dropped. "No, I'm afraid the o'o'a'a is gone. But not the akialoa. I won't accept it. It's too beautiful to not exist any longer."

From his file pouch he drew forth a folded eight-by-ten. Like every other picture he carried, like every map, it was laminated to protect it from the all-pervasive, all-destroying moisture. Unfolded, it revealed a painting of a small bird with a distinctive brown patterning and a lighter buff underbelly. Attractive but hardly spectacular.

Except for the downward curving sickle beak which was fully one third the length of the creature's body. It was this remarkable protuberance that set the akialoa apart from its immediate relatives and, for that matter, from all but a few other birds in the world. It had last been seen in the Alakai in 1973, and the possibility of its continued existence was the reason for Loftgren's university-sponsored expedition.

To find the akialoa, he mused as he gazed at the painting, the details of which he knew as intimately as those of his own body. Finding it would guarantee publication in *Science*, *Natural History*, the *Smithsonian*, *National Geographic* — they would be fighting each other for the right to be first to publish his words and pictures. A coup for the department and for the entire university. Perhaps a chair dedicated in his name. Promotion to professor emeritus of ornithology. The world would be his — or at least, that small portion of it that concerned itself with birding.

Kinkaid had plunged into the Alakai seeking the elusive scimitar-billed bird and had vanished. So had the esteemed Masaki. Now it was his turn, and he fully intended to succeed where they had failed. If the akialoa still lived, it would be left to professional ornithologists such as himself to devise a scheme for ensuring its survival. Only they had the knowledge and ability to do so.

But first he had to find one.

The rain was light when they awoke. Carefully, they packed their equipment. Halfway up a steep, slippery, moss-bedecked slope, he was

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delighted to find an outcropping of ohi'a trees. Fully mature at eight inches high, they were all more than a hundred years old. Later, he spotted a thriving specimen of gunnera, the world's largest herb, with its unique eight-foot leaves. Miniature trees and giant herbs. Reversed proportions, he reflected, were the norm in the Alakai.

Later that day the sun came out and they saw their first birds. Sanchez picked up a pair of bright red apapane, but it was Fanole who pointed out the endemic anianiau and the rarer i'iwi. Loftgren felt left out until he saw a tiny elepaio sheltering from the sun beneath a palapali fern.

Of the akialoa, however, there was no sign.

It was raining seriously when they entered the first bogs, edging around where possible and wading through — sometimes up to their waists — when it was not. Fluttering fragments of fluorescent tape tied to tree branches were all that marked the trail, and these were hard to see in the fog that had settled over the swamp. Several times Loftgren had to admit he would have been lost without Fanole to lead the way.

On the third morning they turned off the intermittent trail and plunged into abject wilderness.

No one bothered to comment on the damp anymore because they were all soaked from head to foot. It was a distinctive, all-pervasive dampness that made one feel as if his skin were slowly sloughing off his body. White ridges appeared on palms and fingers and it felt as if at any minute one's flesh would burst into flagrant, pustulant bloom. Forward progress was now measured in yards instead of miles.

By the end of the week the formerly resolute Sanchez had had enough.

"I want out, Martin." Despite the protection offered by the now battered but still intact slicker, water trickled down the graduate student's sensitive face into his eyes and mouth and ears.

Loftgren regarded him sternly. "There's no 'out' here, Julio. This isn't a library research project. We stay until we've found what we came for or until we run out of supplies."

Fanole materialized silently at the frustrated student's shoulder. "The kid's right. We're in too deep as it is. If we keep going this way and don't manage to hook up with the Mohihi trail, we won't get out of here."

"You'll find the Mohihi."

"Maybe. I've never gone this way before. No one ever has. We could

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step right off the damn Pali, or stumble into Waialeale. You know damn well nobody's gonna spot us from the air because the cloud cover only breaks fully maybe once, twice a year. No emergency helicopter pickups in here, mister. I say it's time to leave. You got what you paid for."

"I paid for an akialoa. We have plenty of food left."

"We've been slogging and bogging for four days and we haven't seen a hint of one. Nobody knows exactly where we are, and in an emergency it wouldn't matter if you could raise someone on that satellite phone tucked in your pack anyway. It's time to go."

"If we don't save the akialoa, no one will. Even in the academic community people are losing interest."

"You can't save what doesn't exist," Fanole replied evenly. "People have been reducing the native birds' range and food supply for hundreds of years. You know that. Even if there were a couple left we don't know if there's enough of whatever they specialize in feeding on to support them. Long-petaled flowers, bugs, whatever. There's so little information about the akialoa that we don't even know for sure what the hell they ate. But that hook of a bill evolved to feed on something specific. We don't know anything about it from the old Hawaiians because they almost never came up here. Country's too rough, too many dangerous spirits. Too many feather-hunters who never made it back. Birds like that don't just switch specialized feeding habits to lobelia or ohi'a in a few decades. The o'o'a'a had a better chance in that respect and it didn't make it. Be reasonable, man."

Loftgren regarded his companions. Fanole was unyielding. Sanchez's expression was a mixture of pleading and anger. Bits of dark, decomposing plant material clung to his forehead and hair, giving him the aspect of a drowned Hispanic dryad.

"All right. But first we finish out the day and then camp. We can start back tomorrow."

Fanole grunted, willing to concede an afternoon. An exhausted and relieved Sanchez merely slumped to the ground where he stood. Beneath him, the spongy earth immediately began to give way, oozing up around his hips and shoulders. Hastily he rose to search for more solid ground. With the intensifying rain shrouding them in wet shadow, they made camp.

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* * *

The song woke him. It was sharp, piercing, utterly distinctive. At first Loftgren thought it might be an akepa, but decided the concluding notes were too high.

Hauling himself to the front of the tent, he unzipped the flap and crawled outside. Fog swirled around the temporary shelter, coiling smoke-like through the trees, reducing visibility to a few yards. An errant shaft of sunlight shining momentarily through the clouds briefly pearlized the drifting fog.

It sat in a tree not ten feet away, singing energetically, that remarkable bill parting slightly to emit each series of notes. He stared breathlessly, hardly daring to move. Then it turned to regard him momentarily out of tiny blinking eyes before flying off into the enveloping mist. Alighting somewhere unseen, it resumed its cheerful song.

Loftgren flung himself back into the tent and pawed at his camera bag until he'd extracted the digital unit. Fanole sat up and blinked at him as the ornithologist struggled feverishly with a fresh storage card. Sanchez stirred sleepily nearby.

"Nude menehune nymphs cavorting in the bogs?" the guide inquired.

"I saw it." Trying to steady shaking fingers, Loftgren slid the camera into its protective housing, checked the telephoto, then began to tighten the knobs on the aluminum strip that would make the plastic airtight and waterproof. "I heard it first, and crawled outside, and I saw it."

Fanole sat up sharply. "What do you mean, you saw it?"

"On a branch, right outside the tent. It was still singing when I came in for the camera." He rose, checked to make sure the card was more than half empty, and started for the tent flap.

"Hey!" Naked, Fanole scrambled out of his bag. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

Loftgren paused in the entrance. "Can't wait. Might never see it again."

"You idiot, hold up!" Fanole lurched to the opening and outside, where it was beginning to rain afresh. On hands and knees, Sanchez blinked out from behind him, trying to wake up.

"What's happening? Where's Professor Loftgren going?"

Fanole stared into the intensifying shower. "He said he heard his damn bird. Says he saw one."

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"Saw one?" Sanchez emerged, arms wrapped across his naked chest, shivering slightly in the early morning chill. "An akialoa?"

"I guess." The guide turned and reentered the tent. Sanchez gazed into the fog and drizzle for a moment longer, then retreated.

"Aren't we going after him?"

The guide's eyes were unblinking, hard. "Without our equipment? Without planning? Not me, kid. Not me. If he has an ounce of intelligence left in him he'll be back within an hour."

Sanchez hesitated in the doorway, wavering. "And if he's not?"

Fanole said nothing. He was heating coffee.

Loftgren ran on, pushing through the trees and brush, ignoring the brilliant red flowers that occasionally cropped up in his path. Once, an apapane trilled close on his left. He ignored it, concentrating only on the song that stayed just ahead of him but never disappeared entirely. The bird was moving, perhaps in search of the particular long flowers it needed to feed on that were nearly extinct elsewhere in the swamp, perhaps toward a nest. A nest! What a discovery that would be!

All he needed was a picture; one lousy picture. A single decent clear shot. Then he'd pick his way back to the tent. They could search further for the bird or return to civilization if Fanole and that simpering Sanchez still insisted on going back. He'd expected better of his most committed graduate student. It was apparent he had the brains but not the dedication. Great discoveries were not made by the cautious or the reluctant.

A second time, the bird lighted in a tree in front of him. He aimed the camera, but it flew off as he thumbed the release and he couldn't be sure he'd gotten the shot. A check of the LCD screen showed that he had not. Damn! It was almost as if the bird was leading him on, deeper into the swamp. Absurd notion. Rare as it was, it would be nothing if not highly skittish. He plunged furiously onward, once wading through a bog that reached up his waist to his chest, then his neck, then to his very chin. You couldn't swim through a bog, he knew. It was too thick, too dense with organic components. But it wasn't quicksand either, fighting to drag you down.

Out of breath, muscles aching, he flailed at a protruding root, got a grip, and pulled himself out. Just ahead the akialoa sang on, its song bright and strong.

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Broken branches and thorns tore at his rain gear, at the sweatshirt beneath, and finally at his exposed skin. He ignored it all just as he ignored the profound dampness, just as he ignored the waning light. Dimly he realized that it would be impossible for him to find his way back to the camp by nightfall. Concentrating as he was on listening for the bird, he had no time for mere personal concerns. But he was strong and experienced. He would find his way back tomorrow.

In the brief, bright, burning fury of discovery, he had forgotten about the cold.

There was just a light breeze, but once the sun went down it was enough to drive the chill through his flesh and into his very bones. At times, he found himself remembering from his reading, the temperature in the Alakai could drop to levels that approached freezing. Ordinarily that would not have mattered, despite his light attire — except for the fact that he was soaked to the skin. Curled by the side of a bog, he started shivering as soon as the sun disappeared completely. By the time it was dark he was trembling violently.

He had nothing to light a fire with, even if any of the sodden pulp that passed for wood around him could have been persuaded to nourish a spark. For a while he tried shouting, gave it up when he realized no one would dare come looking for him in the dark.

Eventually the shivering began to subside. He lay on his side, his breathing slow and shallow, realizing what was happening to him. All because he wanted to help a single, rare bird to survive. His greatest fear was not of death, but that no one else would come after him. The public would forget about the akialoa without dramatic rediscovery and intercession by trained ornithologists. Without the support of dedicated scientists like himself, there was no way the species could survive.

An eternity later he became feebly aware that the light around him was strengthening. Had the night passed so quickly? Or was his perception of time failing faster than his other senses? The omnipresent fog and drizzle prevented the sun from reaching the surface, from warming him. Closer to Heaven he might be, but here it was wet and gray. Searching for more solid ground, he dragged himself with infinite patience away from the bog, until his hand wrapped around something hard and almost dry. A solid piece of wood at last. But when he struggled to pull himself higher

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it came apart in his fingers. Blinking, he examined it weakly in the saturated light. It was not brown, but white. With a great effort he managed to raise his head.

Not one, but two deteriorating skeletons lay just above him, entangled in the trees where they had collapsed. Scraps of rotting, disintegrating clothing clung to the bone-white shoulders and hips. Like desiccated string, a few vestiges of tendons hung slack from the limbs. Exotic mosses and small ferns flourished in the vacant body cavities, having fed well on the now decomposed flesh.

Kinkaid, he thought. Masaki. Or maybe just a pair of disoriented, unlucky hikers. Without a detailed forensic analysis, there was no way to know. Had they been drawn here, too, by the song of the akialoa? Drawn to what? A nesting place, perhaps. Or maybe a courtship ground, where hopeful males displayed their most colorful feathers and warbled their most enchanting songs. From somewhere very close by, an akialoa greeted the morning with the rarest song in the world.

Kinkaid, Masaki, and now him. Everything risked for fame and modest fortune. All to try and help a wonderful, unique bird, and all for naught. How ironic it was that a man should die of hypothermia in the midst of a swamp. He pushed on, staggering and falling, struggling to his feet, always following the song.

He did not know how much time had passed when the sun finally came out. The warmth was as unexpected as it was welcome. With dryness came a rush of renewed strength and determination. Knowing he ought to turn back, he pushed on. Not the wisest of decisions, perhaps, but having come this far and endured so much, he felt he had no choice.

Then he saw them.

They were perched in a cluster of trees green with epiphytes and bromeliads, bejeweling the branches with the brilliance of their plumage. His jaw dropped in wonderment. A pair of black momo sat preening themselves, their own shorter sickle-bills digging parasites from beneath their wings. Nearby, a flock of greater amahiki chattered away like so many lime-green mockingbirds. With its thick, heavy beak, a greater koa finch was plucking caterpillars from the trunk of an isolated tree, while overhead a trio of o'o' flashed their extraordinary tail feathers and brilliant gold wing tufts. Crow-sized kioea yelled at diminutive red-and-gray

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ula-ai-hawane. It seemed as if all the extinct, beautiful birds of Hawaii had gathered in this one place, just waiting for the sun to come out in the Alakai. Waiting for him.

Then he heard the song again, and there they were. Not one, not two, but three pairs cavorting in the tree directly ahead of him, singing their approval of the rare appearance of the sun. The males were seven to seven-and-a-half inches long, bright olive-yellow above and yellow below, the gray-green females slightly smaller. And those amazing, astonishing bills, unequaled anywhere in the kingdom of birds. There was a nest, too. Hearing the peeping of chicks, he hardly dared to breathe. Ever so slowly, he reached for his camera.

It wasn't there. He must have dropped it while running and slogging through the swamp, he realized. No matter. With such a sight as no ornithologist of his generation could dare to dream spread out before him, it was enough simply to sink to his knees and stare, and stare. Spreading his arms out to his sides, he drank in the sight, and the sun. And smiled.

SANCHEZ WASN'T with the search party that stumbled across Loftgren's body early the following year, but Fanole was. The guide recognized the remnants of the ornithologist's boots as he rechecked his group's position on the new GPS he carried. He had to check it three times. Each time, his amazement grew. Without food or proper clothing the haole researcher had somehow made it halfway up the side of Mt. Waialeale itself.

Two of the Forest Service rangers on expedition with the guide peered over his shoulder. "Know him?"

Fanole nodded, resting an arm across one thigh. "Bird prof. Went running off into the depths by himself last year. His graduate student and I spent a day searching for him before we turned and got out. Barely made it." He thought back. "That was two days before Tropical Storm Omolu hit the island."

"Poor son-of-a-bitch." The taller ranger wiped moisture from his face, beneath the rain hood. "What a way to die."

"I dunno." His companion cocked his head slightly to one side. "He looks kind of peaceful to me."

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Fanole grunted, straightened. "We'll have to mark the location. Another crew can haul out the body."

"That's for sure." The first ranger started to turn away, hesitated, looked back and frowned. "What's that he's holding in his right hand?"

The other ranger squinted. Fanole had already started back toward their bivouac. "Plant stuff. Fern leaf, I think. I don't guess that he's holding anything. Fingers contracted while dying." He sighed and shook his head sadly. "Rigor mortis."

Still, the taller man hesitated. Then he shrugged and started after his companion. "Funny. For just a second there I thought it was feathers."

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The firm of Odd Jobs, Inc., is run by Jake and Hildy Pace. They starred in four novels in the 1970s and '80s, including Brainz, Inc. *and* Calling Dr. Patchwork. *Now it's time for the high-tech detectives to investigate this brave new world around us. Let's hope they're not barking up the wrong tree with their latest case.*

Cannibal Farm

By Ron Goulart

THE VICE PRESIDENT OF THE United States was giving gardening tips on her regular afternoon vidwall show when she suddenly turned pale and dropped her trowel.

Touching uneasily at the tiny skin-tone mike implanted in her left ear, the plump, matronly VP exclaimed, "Goodness me, the Surgeon General's office has just announced that there's been an additional outbreak of Mad Dog Disease. This time in the Liberal Zone of Pennsylvania. Please stand by for a soothing, homespun message from the Prez."

Turning away from the vidwall, the Surgeon General said to Jake and Hildy Pace, "That's why I'm here to consult your Odd Jobs, Inc. detective agency."

Jake, a long lean man in his early thirties, pressed a toggle in the arm of his orange hiphug chair. The large wall image faded and died just as the Oval Office appeared on the screen. "That's not exactly true, Norm."

Hildy, her auburn hair pulled back and tied with a twist of black ribbon, was sitting on the piano bench near the wide viewindow in the

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living room of their Redding Sector, Connecticut, estate. "What you actually want to hire us for is to find Dan Lampkin," she said, crossing her long legs and smiling a shade too sweetly.

"The guy who disappeared down in the Empire of Texas three days ago," added Jake.

The moderately obese Norman Winiarski admitted, "Okay, you're right. Lampkin, as you probably know, is an undercover agent for the FDA. He was investigating a tip that this Mad Dog near-plague may be due to terrorist activities."

"Which terrorists?" inquired Hildy.

"Lampkin had fairly reliable information that these particular terrorists were Brazilian," replied the Surgeon General, commencing to pace heavily on the vast thermal rug. "He went across the border into Texas to investigate."

"Investigate what?" inquired Jake. He left his chair, causing it to produce a lip-smacking noise, and picked up his steel-bodied acoustic guitar off one of the antique cobbler's benches.

Winiarski sighed. "FDA agents, particularly Lampkin, are fiercely independent," he said. "All he told his immediate chief was that he was going to look into the Cannibal Farm situation." He looked hopefully from Hildy to Jake and back to Hildy again. "Cannibal Farm?"

"Means nothing." Hildy shook her head. "Jake?"

"Nope." He started, absently, to play one of his original *fados* on the guitar. It was quite sad. Finally he said, "However, for our usual fee, Norm, we'll find out for you. At no extra cost, we'll also track down the strayed Agent Lampkin and, if at all possible, determine what exactly is spreading Mad Dog Disease around the land."

The Surgeon General ceased pacing, coughed into his hand. "About your fee," he began, crossing to the window and gazing out into the waning Connecticut afternoon. "You know that the deficit climbed another trillion this past year, Jake. And President Wheatstraw is determined to fulfill his 2032 campaign promises to build a merry-go-round in every gated community in America and put a man on Jupiter within the next ten years. So things like fees for private — "

"Two hundred thousand worldbux in front," explained Hildy. "Three hundred thousand more when we close the case."

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"Plus," Jake added, "Fifty thousand bux in advance for expenses." He leaned his guitar against the wall.

"Damn it, folks, for that kind of money, the President can build the goodly part of a merry-go-round."

"That's always his option." Jake joined his wife on the piano bench. "Something else that you haven't confided in us, Norm, is that your office *and* the Undercover Division of the FDA sent three additional ops into Texas to track down the missing Lampkin." He grinned a bleak grin. "Two of them vanished completely and one, a lady named Willa Greenow, was found wandering and incoherent in the middle of the Great Tulsa Desert."

Hildy stretched up off the seat. "In the past twenty-four hours, two hundred and sixteen new cases of Mad Dog have been reported in — "

"The Center for Strange Maladies is damn close to developing a vaccine to reverse Mad Dog," said the Surgeon General, without quite enough conviction.

"Not so," countered Jake. "Thus far they've only come up with a way to slow a couple of the symptoms. Specifically, baying at the moon and rolling over and playing dead.

"Frothing at the mouth, chasing one's own backside, running after landcars, and burying bones still can't be controlled." Hildy, taking up her husband's guitar, began playing a bit of Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez.* "And when the Governor of SoCal went on Wallnews last evening to calm his constituents, he broke out barking and then dropped to all fours to chase a stray cat all the way to the onramp of LA Freeway 16."

"The Washington people never come to us unless they're in deep trouble," Jake reminded their prospective client. "You're in deep trouble. Two hundred thousand in front." He nodded at his wife. "Your fingering was off on the last three bars."

"Hooey." She continued to play.

"Folks, this is no time for a domestic squabble," said the uneasy Surgeon General. "How about a hundred fifty thousand bux and a lifetime pass to ride free on any and all merry-go-rounds that the President — "

"Two hundred thousand," said Hildy and Jake in unison.

Sighing again, Winiarski conceded. "Okay, all right. It'll be in your Banx account within the hour, along with the overblown expense advance.

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I'll efax you all the information you'll need on Agent Lampkin as soon as I get back to DC."

"No need," Hildy assured him. "We already have all that stuff." Setting the guitar on the piano bench, she took the Surgeon General by one plump arm and guided him out to the landing area where his maroon skycar was parked.

AS NIGHTFALL CLOSED IN on his skycar, Jake, flying alone, touched the redial toggle on the dash panel. "I'll be in Bushville in the heart of the Texas Empire in about twenty minutes," he said.

The moderately overweight man who'd appeared in the small rectangular pixphone screen was bald and clad in a three-piece bizsuit of yellow checks. Sitting in a lopsided neoprene airchair, he was surrounded by modified computer screens, databoxes, infocells and an eclectic assortment of electronic tapping equipment. "Five hundred bux," he said.

"You're lowering your rate, Steranko?"

"You're getting to be as annoying a kidder as your underweight wife, Jake," observed Steranko the Siphoner. "Five hundred worldbux *in addition to* the paltry seven-fifty you already paid me earlier in the day. This is for the additional material I was about to call you to impart."

"You told me the missing Agent Lampkin had made several visits to the Dallas suburb of Bushville before he disappeared," said Jake, a bit impatiently. "That's why I'm heading there. To find out why."

"That tidbit, which assorted FDA and Domestic FBI men have thus far failed to unearth, is what you purchased for seven-fifty." The bald man shifted in his inflated chair, causing it to make a quavery kazoo sound. "The specific location the gink visited, which it took me nearly two hours of intensive electronic probing to find for you, Jake old pal, will cost you an extra — "

"A hundred."

"C'mon, at least four hundred. Otherwise you're going to have to go door to door to — "

"Two hundred."

"Three."

"Two-fifty," Jake told the hairless informant. "No more, since getting

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me the address was part of the original deal. But, since I'm in a hurry, I'll — "

"Okay, okay." Steranko and his neoprene chair sighed in unison. "Friend Lampkin — and I don't yet know if this was duty or recreation — paid several nocturnal visits to the Malt Shop Bordello at 232 American Way in Bushville."

Jake frowned. "That's a branch of the whorehouse chain that stocks only teenage android hookers," he said. "Lampkin's dossier doesn't indicate that he — "

"Be that as it may, he frequented the joint," Steranko informed him. "And he always spent his time with the same andy tart. Look."

The baldheaded siphoner's image left the screen, replaced by a vidcaz showing a slim red-haired and freckled girl of sixteen. Her hair was in two pigtails and she wore an antiquated schoolgirl outfit that included a short checkered skirt, white blouse, dark cardigan, and knee socks.

"Hello there," she said in a sweet youthful voice. "I'm Polly Pigtails and I'm waiting here for you at the Malt Shop Bordello in Bushville — open twenty-four hours each and every day. Golly, I'd just love to have you buy me a big foamy strawberry soyshake and then, if you want to, help me with my math homework. I'll be so grateful that I'll — "

"Enough," said Jake.

Steranko reappeared. "Lots of guys admire younger women, you know. Especially when they get up in years and — "

"Lampkin is thirty-one. Any idea of what actually went on between him and Polly?"

"Can't get at the monitor tapes yet, Jake. For an extra five hundred I can put in another grueling session of — "

"Nope. I'll just drop in at the Malt Shop myself," he said. "Anything else for me?"

"Christ, Jake, you've already gotten about two thousand bux worth of information for a paltry — "

"Anything else?"

"Nothing on Cannibal Farm," answered the hairless tapper. "I'll keep trying, although I'm getting a hunch that somebody doesn't want me to go nosing into that."

"When was Lampkin last seen?"

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"The FDA reports are wrong. The guy actually vanished right after his last call at the Malt Shop Bordello."

"Okay. See what else you can come up — "

"You know, Jake, I also provided you with the lead your skinny spouse is following up," Steranko reminded. "That alone ought to be worth a little something extra."

"We'll pay you another five hundred for *new* information."

Shrugging, Steranko said, "If you weren't a pal of mine, Jacob, I'd go on strike for higher — "

"Landing pattern for Bushville Skyport now going into effect," announced Jake's dash voxbox.

"I'll call you later." Jake turned off the phone to concentrate on the landing procedures.

Hildy was now a blonde with a highly convincing slight Swedish accent. "Yumping yimminy," she exclaimed, gazing around the bookshop in the mall/lobby of the Dallas MaxiHotel. "How quaint, books printed on paper."

The store manager said, "The Empire of Texas believes in time-honored traditions, Miss Nord." He was a heavyset cyborg of about forty with a faintly believable wig of astrohair. "The people who read books at all — I like to call them the Happy Few — prefer them in the format that has served this nation so well for — "

"And you told me on the pixphone that you're selling my book." She gave him an appreciative smile.

"We do indeed, Miss Nord. It's what passes for a bestseller in these parts. This week alone we sold three copies."

"How encouraging."

"That's why, when I learned you were staying at the Maxi, I rushed to invite you to pop in and autograph the remaining five copies of *Hey, Pete, Let's Eat More Meat!*" he explained as he guided her over to a small display table where the remaining copies of Erika Nord's latest anti-vegetarian cookbook rested.

"I imagine my book goes over especially well with all the cattlemen hereabouts."

"Oh, that reminds me," said the bookshop owner. "I was going to send

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out to the Burger Boyz Café across the mall/lobby for a couple of Big Fat Burgers and a pair of Genetically Engineered Safesalads. If you'd care to join me for a — "

"Alas, I can't," said Hildy. "I have an appointment this evening at the Dallas Campus of the Empire University."

She had only accepted the bookshop invitation to help establish the fake identity she had assumed for her part in the investigation.

"Well then, we'd better get down to the autographing." He picked up a copy of *Hey, Pete, Let's Eat More Meat!*, glancing at the tri-op author photo on the real-paper jacket. "I must say, Miss Nord, that you're even better looking in person. And slimmer."

"Yah," she agreed. "I'm slimmer because I've been following my own diet. More meat, less carbs."

Jake, blond and bearded, rested an elbow on the soda fountain counter and said, "I'm Ogden Sanhammel."

The android soda jerk said, "It's a pleasure to have an industrialist of your international stature frequenting the Malt Shop Bordello, sir."

"Obviously," agreed Jake in his new, gruff voice. "Now then, sonny, I ordered — "

"I mean to say," continued the white-coated fountain andy, "your Designer Diapers are bestsellers in every corner of the globe and Sanhammel Incontinental Enterprises has helped millions of men suffering from faulty bladder — "

"I know all that," cut in Jake. "I made a reservation for Polly Pigtails at nine P.M. Where the devil is she?"

The soda fountain attendant scanned the dozen neometal tables that were arranged around the place. Only three teen andies were present, each at a separate table, sipping root beer floats or simulating the eating of banana splits. Two were dressed in schoolgirl outfits, the other in abbreviated tennis togs of white sinsilk.

"Oh, I remember now, sir." He picked up a plasglass and commenced polishing it. "Polly was a bad girl and had to stay after school. If you go up to Detention Room 2, you'll find her." His grin was rather unsettling.

The girl andy in tennis clothes winked at Jake as he crossed to an upramp.

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* * *

Polly Pigtails clapped her hands together. "Gee whiz," she exclaimed, rising up behind her neowood school desk. "Imagine me meeting Ogden Sanhammel, the inventor of Designer Diapers for incontinent men and the coiner of the wonderful advertising slogan — 'If you have to wet your pants...do it in style!' Gosh, turning a trick for a man of your stature is — "

"Hush for a moment, Polly," advised Jake. From his jacket pocket he extracted a small silver egg. He placed it atop a side table and tapped it with his forefinger. "Okay, the secsystem will be off for twenty minutes and nobody in the bordello will know it."

"Gee, what sort of strange unspeakable acts are you contemplating, Mr. Sanhammel?"

"We're going to have a chat." Crossing to the teen android, he slapped a parasite control disk against her temple.

JAKE WAS a half block away from the Malt Shop Bordello, walking toward where he'd parked his rented landcar, when a slim, dark-haired young woman came running out of an alley on his right.

"Help, help!" she cried. "Yeggs, Yeggs!"

Halting, Jake said, "Over here."

The frightened young woman ran up to him, put her arms around him. "They're trying to mug me."

Out of the shadowy alley lumbered two gunmetal robots. Stenciled across their broad chests were the words — *Yeggs™ Property of International Mafia, Inc. Don't Mess With Us!*

"Scram, bud," advised the Yegg bot on the left.

"Else we'll stomp youse into the paving," added the other large robot.

"Please, help me," pleaded the distraught young woman.

Moving in front of her, Jake suggested, "Go away, fellas."

"Take a hike, buster."

"The Empire is a democracy," the other bot pointed out. "We got a right to bear arms, mug whomsoever we please and — "

"And coldcock any wiseass who doesn't mind his own stinking business."

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Taking a disabler rod from his coat pocket, Jake aimed it at the approaching Yeggs and fired twice.

They, in turn, produced hollow bonking sounds and ceased to function.

"I'm really grateful," said the young woman. And then, "Say, aren't you Jake Pace under those whiskers?"

"Well, yeah," he admitted.

"Don't you remember me? I'm Honey Bee Sumuru, the Country & Western singer," she explained. "We met at the Bob Wills & His Texas Playboys Annual Memorial Concert two years back in Fort Worth. You were doing your marvelous medley of Little Jimmy Dickens hits."

"I remember, yeah."

"Say, I'm on my way to perform at the Cow Chow Festival over at the Church & State Café in the next block," said Honey Bee. "Why don't you tag along, Jake, and sit in on guitar? If, that is, you can spare the time."

"Afraid not. My schedule won't — "

"Heck of a lot of my good buddies are going to be disappointed."

"Why would they be — "

"They'll be there. And, Jake, they're still talking about how terrific you were at that concert back then. Your fingering and your yodeling were — "

"Okay," said Jake. "I guess I have time to do a few numbers."

Hildy, still in her Erika Nord persona, landed her skycar in the Visitors Landing Area of the campus. The shopping arcade next to the lot was still ablaze with throbbing floating adsigns and logos. Music and noise were abundant.

Heading for the Animal Husbandry Building, Hildy took a pedramp that passed a Designer Diaper Shop with its flashing sign that said *You're Never Too Young To Be Incontinent! Be Prepared!* Next came a ServoMech Outlet — *Trade In Your Old Bot! Pay Practically Nothing...Or So It Seems!* After passing a Burger Boyz restaurant — *Buy 4 Big Fat Burgers And Get A Full Pound of Ground Beef FREE!* — Hildy turned onto a tree-lined lane that led to the campus building she sought.

Two university gardeners were testing a stand of holographic elm trees, causing the images to wax and wane.

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A large pinked-faced man of about fifty was awaiting her on the neostone steps of the domed Animal Husbandry Building. Giving out a pleased chuckle, he came hurrying down the stairs to her. "Hi, hon," said Professor Walter Brinkerhoff, spreading his arms wide. "It's a true pleasure to meet the author of my favorite book, *Hey, Pete, Let's Eat More Meat!*, in the flesh, as it were. How about a big hug?"

"I think not, professor." Smiling amiably, she dodged his charge. "What I'm here for, as I explained on the phone, is some information about the hybrid veal you and your staff have been working on."

"Come on up to my lab, hon." His attempt to pat her on the backside was not, due to evasive footwork on her part, at all successful.

The laboratory itself was large, offwhite, and empty. "Very impressive," said Hildy in her faux Swedish accent. "Now, can you show me your data on — "

"In a minute, sweetheart." The husky Professor Brinkerhoff crossed to a wall panel, pressed his right hand flat against it. Above the faint metallic whirring, he said, "I'm not the clunk you take me for, ma'am."

"By yimminy, what are you alluding to?"

"Erika and I are buddies from way back, Mrs. Pace." He smiled broadly as he came toward her. "She's giving a lecture, even as we speak, out in the Orinda Sector of NorCal."

"Oh, so?" Hildy shrugged her left shoulder.

"I turned off my secsystem, hon," the professor explained. "Since the university administration isn't aware of some of my nonacademic pursuits. And then, too, they probably wouldn't approve of most of my interrogation methods."

"No doubt." Hildy dodged, gracefully, to her left as the big professor came charging at her.

Pivoting, she kicked him in the groin as he went charging by. Then she jumped, grabbed his collar, and yanked him off his feet.

As he was falling to the offwhite floor, Brinkerhoff groaned. He hit with a resounding thunk.

Before he could even contemplate rising, Hildy had a knee on his chest. "Let's have a conversation, hon," she suggested as she attached a truth disk to his thick neck.

* * *

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Propped in an offwhite neometal chair, Professor Brinkerhoff said in a droning voice, "I got to tell you, hon, you surely are pretty."

"Of course you do." Hildy was seated, cross-legged, on an offwhite stool facing him. "That disk guarantees you'll tell me nothing but the truth."

"You're even a lot better looking than the real Erika. In fact — "

"Tell me about Dan Lampkin," she requested. "According to our informant, Lampkin visited you the day before he disappeared."

"Not too bright, that Agent Lampkin," said the mind-controlled professor. "I do give him credit for linking me with the whole business. But then, like a ninny, he came walking right into my lab to question me."

"What'd he link you with?"

"Why, Mad Dog Disease, sweetheart."

"You're not a terrorist from Brazil."

"Hell, that's just a cover story we got circulating. Cost us a million and a half to hire a topnotch rumor agency, but was, despite what some of my skinflint associates say, well worth it."

"So what really causes Mad Dog?"

"Hamburger."

Hildy blinked, leaned slightly closer to the droning professor. "How so?"

"It was the Burger Boyz execs who bought my idea," he responded. "In the four months they've used the process, they've saved three point four million dollars. By 2035, they'll — "

"Give me some details about your process."

"Beef is expensive, prices going up all the time," he said. "But if you could find a cheap additive, why, you could beat all the competition. Burger Boyz are using — "

"Dogs? They grind up dogs for their hamburgers?"

"With my process you use fifteen percent pure dog meat, sweetheart. But it's treated so that it's completely undetectable."

"Why dogs and not horses?"

"Dogs are a heck of a lot cheaper," answered Brinkerhoff. "Every city has hundreds of stray hounds and in the country there are even more. We round them up. Plus which, we've started our own puppy mills. Granted, dogs are smaller than cattle, but they're so darn cheap, Burger Boyz are still cashing in."

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"Where does Mad Dog Disease come in?"

His droning voice took on a sadder tone. "I must admit, hon, that I didn't anticipate that," the professor said. "Turns out twenty-six percent of the people who enjoy our enhanced beef will come down with the darn thing."

"And what's Cannibal Farm?"

He made a droning chuckle. "Funny you should ask that," Brinkerhoff told her. "That's where they took your husband."

Hildy left the stool, took hold of the professor's arm. "Jake is at Cannibal Farm?"

"Sure enough. Somebody picked him up near the Malt Shop whorehouse and lured him into a saloon, where they used a stungun on him."

"Don't tell me," said Hildy, angry. "They invited him to drop in and play saxophone in a Retro Bebop quintet or harmonica in an Electric Skiffle group or — "

"As I understand it, Jake Pace was invited to play guitar in a Country & Western band."

Hildy said, "Five minutes after I remove this disk, you won't remember I was here," said. "But first, tell me where Cannibal Farm is."

He told her.

A great many dogs were barking, howling and growling. Jake became aware that he was awake.

Up above him was a turquoise ceiling of sinwood. He was stretched out on what felt like a floating plazcot. When he rubbed his palm over a sore spot on his chest, Jake realized that he wasn't tied up or strapped to the cot.

"How are you feeling, Mr. Pace?"

"Chagrined," he replied, sitting up. Too rapidly it turned out, which caused a brief spell of dizziness. "I'm an excellent musician, but I have to refrain from letting people lure me into traps by inviting me to.... You're Lampkin?"

The lean, dark-haired man sitting in a hiphugger chair near Jake's floating cot nodded. "I am. Somebody hired Odd Jobs, Inc. to hunt for me, huh?"

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"The Surgeon General himself." Working slowly and carefully, Jake was able to arrange himself into a sitting position on the cot's edge. "Where exactly are we?"

"This is Cannibal Farm." The missing FDA agent gestured at the small room they were sharing. "It's underground beneath the Great Tulsa Desert."

"And the dogs I hear are the ones the Burger Boyz will be turning into hamburger?"

"Yeah," Lampkin answered. "Actually this is the *central* Cannibal Farm. They have, thus far, set up seventeen of these processing facilities across the country."

Jake made a successful attempt to stand up. "You found out about Mad Dog Disease and the Cannibal Farm facilities from Polly Pigtails."

The FDA agent nodded again. "I found out that Professor Brinkerhoff was a regular customer of hers," he explained. "By that time I was already suspicious of him. He confided in her and by tapping her brain chip, I found that Mad Dog wasn't part of a Brazilian terrorist plot but rather a side effect of the dubious ground meat the Burger Boyz had been using."

"Yep, I found that out from Polly, too."

Lampkin's eyebrows raised slightly. "I thought they'd erased her memories after they found out I'd been questioning her and grabbed me."

"They did, but you can bring up wiped out data if — "

"Well, maybe somebody can do the same for us."

"Meaning we're waiting for mindwipes?"

"That's one of the possibilities. The CEO of Burger Boyz and at least three of the members of the Board favor imposing forgetfulness on us."

Jake started, tentatively, pacing their cell. "And the other faction?"

"They think it would be a great idea to process us along with a day's supply of dogs," said Agent Lampkin somewhat forlornly. "The grinding equipment has the capacity and it's damned efficient."

"Since they've nicknamed their facilities Cannibal Farm," speculated Jake, "it's possible they've already done something like that."

"Not a very noble ending," said Lampkin. "Ending up as a bunch of Big Fat Burgers."

"Nope," agreed Jake. "We'll have to work out a way to avoid that."

* * *

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Hildy had aged twenty years and her hair had turned gray overnight. She punched out the secret landing code on the dash panel of her borrowed skyambulance.

"Accepted," spoke the voxbox.

The ambulance dropped down through the desert morning, aiming at the landing strip that had materialized at the edge of the small, mostly holographic oasis.

As her vehicle settled on the strip, Hildy activated the tap-proof pixphone. "Stand by, folks," she said and ended the call.

Two heavyset humans in two-piece orange bizsuits rose up out of an opening near a flickering stand of palm trees. They were accompanied by a buff-color guardbot.

Hildy, limping slightly, stepped down from the ambulance, smiling bravely. "Excuse my wobble, gentlemen," she said in an Eastern college accent. "Regrettably, I'm not yet completely used to my cloned leg."

"It's hardly noticeable, Dr. Hodap," said the slightly smaller of the heavyset men.

"Forgive me, ever since the skyliner crash I'm just terrible about names. You're Mr. Ulsh, are you not?"

He smiled as he came closer. "We're both Mr. Ulsh," he clarified. "I'm Leon Ulsh and this is my kid brother Rodney Ulsh."

"But of course," said Hildy. "We've done business before."

"For myself," said Leon, "I'm glad we're doing business again. And I'm pleased that you're going to be handling the mindwipes that the Burger Boyz board finally okayed for Agent Lampkin and that meddling oaf Jake Pace."

"Wait now," said Rodney. "Don't go giving the doctor the impression that I favored grinding them up with the dogs. That sort of thing, so I'm told, can seriously detract from the flavor as well as the grillability of the meat. For myself — "

"Gentlemen, as you can well imagine," cut in Hildy, "my schedule is a full one. So if we can get on with the mindwipe procedure, I'll — "

"Of course, dear lady," said Leon, reaching for her arm. "Allow me to escort you to the interrogation room."

She took a step backward on the sand. "Dear me, I'm still so forgetful." Turning, she ran back to the ambulance and climbed up into the cabin. "I forgot my medical bag."

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When she lifted the sinleather bag off the passenger seat, she also touched a press key next to the pixphone.

Rodney carried the bag for her, Leon took her arm. The guardbot led the way to the entrance to the underground facility.

But before anyone could begin the descent into Cannibal Farm, dogs began to pour up out of the opening. Big dogs, small dogs, purebred dogs, mutt dogs, yelping dogs, barking dogs, snarling dogs, howling dogs, gray dogs, white dogs, black dogs, tan dogs, spotted dogs, yellow dogs. Dozens came leaping out onto the sandy ground of the oasis. Followed by dozens more and dozens after that.

"Something's terribly wrong," cried Leon.

"Apparently so," agreed Hildy.

APPROXIMATELY twenty-six minutes earlier, the neometal door of the cell had suddenly come sliding open. A husky woman in a white three-piece medisuit was standing on the threshold with her stungun aimed at Jake.

"Good news," announced the nurse. "You boys aren't going to the grinders. Instead it'll be just a simple, painless mindwipe."

"Praise be," said Jake, who was sitting on the edge of one of the floating cots.

"This is a violation of our basic civil rights," Agent Lampkin pointed out.

"Nobody has civil rights this far underground," the hefty nurse explained. "Now, if you'll get off your duffs, I'll escort you up to the interrogation room."

"So the board of directors voted against converting us into Big Fat Burgers," said Jake.

"The order for the mindwipes came through first thing this morning, boys," she told them. "And here's another piece of good news. Dr. Helen Hodap will be arriving in a very short while to handle the job. Not only is she a noted brainwasher, but she's an extremely gentle and caring person."

"That's encouraging. In fact...." Grimacing, Jake let his sentence trail off.

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Lampkin eyed him, concern on his face. "Are you still feeling poorly?"

"Nope, I'm okay. Nothing serious." He attempted to stand, but instead fell to one knee.

"No funny stuff, Pace," warned the big woman, gesturing with the stungun.

"He's been feeling bad." The FDA agent jerked a thumb in the direction of one of the ceiling cams. "Ask the guys monitoring our cell."

Jake made a successful, though shaky, rise to his feet. "I'll be fine. And after my mindwipe, I probably won't even remember I was feeling odd."

"Let's get moving." The nurse took a few backward steps into the corridor.

"Want me to help you, Jake?"

Shaking his head, Jake headed for the doorway. "If I'd known last week what I know now about the Burger Boyz burgers, I wouldn't have had lunch three days in row last week at their Redding fly-in restaurant."

As their escort urged them along a brightlit turquoise corridor, she said, "There's no connection between eating Burger Boyz sandwiches and any known illness. In fact — "

"Yow." Jake fell to his knees, then began barking.

From a corridor on the right came the barking and howling of quite a few penned dogs.

Lampkin moved to help Jake stand. "The poor guy's got Mad Dog."

"Back off," ordered the nurse. She nudged Jake in the thigh with a white-booted foot. "Get up, Pace."

Instead of complying, Jake fell forward, rolled over on his back and began panting loudly.

The angry nurse leaned toward him, poking at the air between them with the barrel of the stungun.

Jake's left foot snapped up, kicking the gun from her grasp. He then went rolling into her legs, toppling her. When she slammed to the floor, he delivered two chopping blows to the back of her neck.

As the husky nurse sighed into unconsciousness, Jake frisked her pockets. "Here's her electronic passkey," he said, dropping it into his jacket pocket.

Lampkin had, meantime, retrieved the stungun. "Somebody's seen this on a monitor cam for sure."

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"What we need now is a nice diversion." He started running down the corridor that led to the protesting dogs.

THE STAMPEDING dogs knocked over both the Ulsh Brothers and caused their guardbot to take a rattling fall into one of the few authentic palm trees decorating the oasis.

Hildy, sitting in the open doorway of the ambulance, watched as several hundred escaping dogs went running off across the Great Tulsa Desert.

Leon was the first to return to an upright position. "We're going to have to start a roundup." He brushed dust from his orange trousers. "If those dogs are spotted by one of the news satellites — "

"Don't fret about that. It's the least of your worries." Hildy pointed skyward.

A dozen skyvans were dropping down through the bright midmorning sky. Seven of them had *PetRescue Commandos* emblazoned on their undersides. The rest of the rapidly descending vans represented most of the major vidwall news services, including Murdoch-Disney and NewzLib.

"How in the hell," inquired Rodney as he hopped and dodged until he was out of the path of the continuous flow of escaping canines, "did they find out about this location?"

"I tipped them off," admitted Hildy.

"Why the devil did you do that, Dr. Hodap?" asked Leon.

"Mostly," she answered, smiling sweetly, "because I'm Hildy Pace and not Helen Hodap."

"Flummoxed," said Rodney. "Once again, Leon, you've — "

"You were equally flummoxed, Rodney. So there's no — "

"There's the first bunch of animal rescue militants coming in for a landing," Hildy pointed out. "Some of them will round up the dogs and get them shipped to shelters. The others will help me rescue my husband and put Cannibal Farm out of business."

"I rescued myself," announced Jake as he emerged in the wake of a flurry of dogs. "As well as Agent Lampkin."

"However," added the FDA man, "we've got quite a few guards and other personnel on our tail."

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"The commandos will take care of them." She dropped from the ambulance. "You okay, Jake?"

"Well, Hildy, I always feel a mite queasy the first couple of days after being shot down with a stungun." He hurried over to his wife. "Outside of that, I'm in tiptop shape. Hey, I like you with gray hair. It's subtle and oddly — "

"What did they invite you to do back there in Bushville? Your Johnny Cash medley?"

"Nothing so obvious. Little Jimmy Dickens."

"Oy," she said as he kissed her.

All around them a pitched battle was getting under way.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

IT HAS BEEN well over a decade since *F&SF* ran a serial, but that will change next month. Our January issue features part one of Terry Bisson's new tale of Venus, *Planet of Mystery*. This one's a planetary romance the likes of which we haven't seen in a long time.

We promised to bring you Robert Reed's "Less Than Nothing" this month, but unforeseen complications led us to reschedule it for January. We also plan to bring you more Robert Reed stories in the year ahead—trust us on that one.

Other stories you can look forward to in the months ahead include David Gerrold's edgy "thirteen o'clock," Madeleine E. Robins's tale of Fairy Manhattan, "Boon," and Bruce McAllister's unforgettable account of "The Boy in Zaquitos." We've also got new stories by Albert Cowdrey, Michaela Roessner, Gary W. Shockley, and Mike Shultz coming soon. Subscribe now and you'll get a year's worth of gems like these delivered right to your mailbox.

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

EARTH HITS THE FAN

"...Yet across the gulf of space, minds that are to our minds as ours are to those of the beasts that perish, intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic, regarded this earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drew their plans against us..."

THOSE words, which might well describe the DreamWorks team, their self-image and calculated approach to world domination, form a portion of the opening of H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, a novel that shares a title (minus the antiquated first "The") and a basic plot with Steven Spielberg's latest movie; yet the two properties have little in common thematically. Wells's novel was essentially a reaction to the unification and militarization of Germany, and, like most of his science fiction, viewed human nature and human destiny in a pessimistic light. It would be interesting if a movie were to be crafted from those materials. (Actually, I just learned that such a movie does exist, Timothy Hines's *H. G. Wells' 'War of the Worlds,'* though I haven't watched it.) Until that happens we have, instead, Byron Haskin's 1953 B-picture starring Gene Barry, and now the remake, starring the equally gifted Tom Cruise, which embodies Spielberg's desire to maximize corporate profits and is infused with...no, make that *drenched in* a Wal-Mart-simple, Wal-Mart-sized dose of American Family Values (™). You know, the kind of values that a goodly number of Americans have a childlike faith in, but that don't exist outside of Norman Rockwell paintings, Disneyland, and the movies. As opposed to the novel, which conveys the funereal

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sadness that arises from a historical loss of innocence, Spielberg's values message is so much in the foreground that the film comes across, ultimately, as a lesson in parental responsibility, with the loss of a billion lives rendered as an ancillary matter and the alien invasion serving more as an alien intervention.

War of the Worlds has been widely publicized as the most expensive picture Spielberg has yet directed (maybe the most expensive of All Time!), which may portend he's getting desperate in his efforts to persuade us that everything happens for a reason and love is all you need bippety boppity boo — desperate enough, at any rate, to cast America's living Amber Alert, the uber-waif Dakota Fanning, as the fragile, oft-menaced symbol of those values. There's no one who can stare out a car window in terror and/or confusion like Dakota, and Spielberg takes full advantage of her talent. In fact, not only does he show Dakota staring in every possible setting — in cars, basements, on ferry landings, etc. — but he has also chosen to feature her other major talent, a piercing scream, treating us to a variety of sonic stylings not heard on the planet since Janis Joplin was in full throat.

You all know the story, or you should. The Martians invade and basically kick our collective butt. People flee before a terrible, implacable force. Or, as DreamWorks would have it: "As Earth is invaded by alien tripod fighting machines, one family fights for survival." That family, the Ferriers, Daddy Ray (Cruise), kiddies Robbie (Justin Chatwin) and Rachel (Fanning), and Mommy Mary Ann (Miranda Otto), are typically Spielbergian: a good-hearted American family; semi-precocious kids with a smidgen of dysfunctionality; parents divorced; dad not yet a grown-up, a diminutive dockworker who drives a muscle car and stops just short of being a deadbeat...yet this won't prevent him, armed with only a primitive implement (grenade), from facing down, before movie's end, an alien monstrosity (100-foot-high tripod equipped with something like lasers), and shouting, "Keep away from my daughter, you filthy bastard!" or some such expression of bravado twisted into a tagline. (Actually, they eschew the tagline, but it's there in spirit.) Spielberg's success as a director is chiefly due to the fact that he portrays Americans as we like to see ourselves: a simple, good-hearted people, a little dysfunctional, but

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boy-oh-boy are we ever endlessly brave and resourceful when aliens threaten our precious kinder. As a defender of American Family Values™, Spielberg yields primacy to no one, not Jerry Falwell, not Michael Medved, not even Michael Ovitz.

With Bayonne, New Jersey, subbing for Wells's England, Ray Ferrier experiences a jot of character-establishing dysfunctionality with his wife, who's dumping the kids on him for the weekend — she's off to Boston with her new husband to visit her parents — and then coaxes his daughter Rachel to step outside so as to view some churning, eerily glowing clouds, precisely the sort of cloud formation that purely screams Aliens! to anyone who's ever seen a movie, especially a Spielberg movie. The clouds pass over, spitting lightnings that transmit an EMP, shutting down every electrical device in the area (except digital cameras, apparently) — twenty-six bolts that all strike the exact same spot, dead center of an intersection in downtown Bayonne. A crowd gathers to gaze in wonderment at the hole created and, in the movie's best scene, the first of the tripods emerges from its subterranean hideout, thrusting up chunks of asphalt, shouldering aside buildings — turns out the lightning has also transported an alien crew aboard the machine — and strides through the town, emitting foghorn blasts and slaughtering people with a weapon that incinerates them into a substance that greatly resembles 9/11 ash. This is the first of many 9/11 references in the film, including posterboards with the names and photos of the missing, personal items raining from the sky, a crashed airliner, etc. When conjoined with blood-sucking aliens and gigantic death-dealing tripods, these references don't come across as much topical as they do exploitative, trivializing, and tasteless.

Anyway, Ray gets the kids out of the house and into the only functioning car in the vicinity, and they head for Boston and Mom, becoming part of the horde of refugees fleeing along the highways. During this sequence, despite an almost non-stop scream-a-thon by Rachel, Spielberg manages to generate some tension. The chaos of their flight; the panic and desperation of the refugees, shown most clearly in a scene wherein Ray is carjacked by a mob, some of whom pry at the shattered windshield with bloody fingers; the sight of a passenger train in flames racing along a track; the choice Ray is forced to make between his

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children when his rebellious teenage son runs off to join a hopeless battle that ends with a valley turned into a bowl of fire; all this is managed credibly and with some panache, although it never completely succeeds in making you forget that somewhere close by is an AD shouting action (for a more successful take on western refugees fleeing a disaster, see Michael Haneke's *Time of the Wolf*, starring Isabelle Huppert). But then, right when you're getting set to dig your knees into the seat in front of you, preparing for bigger and better shocks, Spielberg sucks the energy out of his film by depositing Rachel and Ray into the basement of a battered house with Harlan Ogilvy (Tim Robbins) for a half hour, a good deal of it taken up by Robbins doing a whack-job take on his Davy Boyle character from *Mystic River*. Granted, a version of this scene is included in both the book and the original movie, but in those instances it acts as a peak moment of suspense — here it does not. With Ogilvy mugging and muttering all the while, the three avoid capture when an alien device snakes into the basement; but as handled by Spielberg, this scene reminds one far too much of the velociraptors-in-the-kitchen scene in *Jurassic Park* to be effective. Another incursion, this by the aliens themselves (they look rather Gollum-esque, more suited to a film like *Mars Attacks*), who snoot about examining family photographs and the like, creates an odd tone-break, during which Spielberg indulges in an in-joke with a bicycle à la *ET*, a moment that strikes an incongruous note when you consider that these are the same "intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic" who have been laying waste to Planet Earth and have a penchant for sucking the blood out of people through enormous metal straws.

When at length they emerge from the cellar, not only has the tension been dissipated, but the entire look of the film has changed. From the naturalistic grays of the early scenes, and the more-or-less naturalistic hues of the night shots, when Rachel wanders out of the ruined basement to be snatched up into the sky by a metal tentacle, we are immersed in luminous reds (the hue of the alien growths that crop up wherever the tripods pass, fertilized by human blood) and other day-glo-ish shades, a color scheme and attendant camera style that calls to mind William Menzies's fifties-paranoia classic, *Invaders from Mars*. Since Spielberg is far too

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knowledgeable a film wonk for this to be accidental, one must assume that this is a misstep, another break in tone that diminishes the effectiveness of the ensuing scene by rendering it as fantasy. Indeed, the scene might have come off as fantasy under any circumstance: Ray, armed with two grenades, allows himself to be snatched up into the tripod, deposited in a metal basket that rides along beneath the body of the machine and holds several dozen people, who are plucked singly out of the basket and drawn through a kind of flexible nipple into the craft to serve, presumably, as a snack. In something of an upset, considering the machine has spent thousands of years encysted deep underground and has proved capable of forcing its way up through layers of earth and stone, two grenades introduced to its interior are sufficient to blow it to smithereens — but we are accustomed to Hollywood grenades having that type of supernal power. Naturally Rachel and Ray survive the fall and are soon hightailing it toward the ruins of Boston where the microbes have already begun their invasion-repelling work and a sappy ending awaits, the whole family improbably reunited, standing as though posed in the doorway of their apparently alien-proof Boston home, Mommy, Step-Daddy, two perfect white-haired grandparents played by Gene Barry and Ann Robinson of the original movie, and, El Shockamundo!, Robbie, the most unlikely survivor of all.

Spielberg loves the smell of sentiment in the morning.

But sentiment at the expense of narrative honesty?

Nobody should love that.

In truth, as horrid as the ending is, the movie has come apart long before reaching that point, and it was never much to begin with. Forget the logical gaffes — and there are plenty of those, too many to mention — *War of the Worlds* fits into Spielberg's work the way Cronenberg's *eXistenZ* fits into his, as a sort of greatest hits package: there's the theme of human genocide, there's an implacable menace bigger and nastier than *Jaws*, there's the dysfunctional family, there's Tom Cruise battling sophisticated machines (*Minority Report*), there's the reimagining of the velociraptor scene, there's a wee one staring and staring into brilliant light.... There's not a single original stroke in the entire picture, and if someone's going to spend close to 200 million dollars on a movie, you've got a right to expect an original stroke or two. Spielberg

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has the reputation for being a great storyteller, but it's been thirty years since he knew how to end a movie, lately he's been having trouble with the middles, and now, midway through the Oughts, he's not even competent; he directs with an old man's halting instincts, falling back on tricks that worked when he was young. The ending of the novel, the destruction of the Martians by the germ that causes the common cold.... Well, they probably should have come up with a variant ending, a bioweapon or some such, because a twenty-first century audience simply won't buy that creatures who've been studying us for millennia wouldn't know about germs, unless the film's a period piece. But one way or another, it requires a slow cinematic development; it should gradually dawn upon the dazed survivors, as they wander across a devastated landscape populated by the stunned and the dying, that they have been saved, that life will go on where before there was only the prospect of certain death, and we should experience their confusion, their burgeoning hope, and, finally, their exultation. And the fate of the Ferrier family should be shown in that context, the minuscule human triumph amid the larger human tragedy. But Spielberg, with miserly economy, deals with this business off-handedly, in maybe a minute of screen time, kind of a *They're sick? huh, wow, Whaddaya-know* moment, and relegates an explanation to Morgan Freeman's voiceover at the end. You see, he could hardly wait to get to the scene that, for him, constitutes the emotional climax, as if the death of millions and the destruction of cities were all no more than the set-up for a really big hug.

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Geoff Ryman credits the students in the Clarion West 2004 class with originating "monkpunk," a concept that helped inspire this story. More direct inspiration for this story came from an article by David Chandler concerning a real monk named Kai who led a revolt against the Vietnamese in the Nineteenth Century. Whatever the inspiration, the results are distinctive.

Mr. Ryman, for those who don't know his work, is the author of The Unconquered Country, The Child Garden, Was, *and* 253. *His most recent novel,* Air, *was a finalist for several awards. His next novel,* The King's Last Song, *is a mainstream novel about ancient and contemporary Cambodian history. It's due out in England this spring.*

The Last Ten Years in the Life of Hero Kai

By Geoff Ryman

KAI WAS ALREADY AN OLD man when he mastered the art of being a hero.

He was a student of war and a student of God. He was a particular follower of the text *The Ten Rules of Heroism*.

The Text is one hundred palm leaves long, but these are the Ten Rules.

1. Heroism consists of action
2. Do not act until necessary
3. You will know that the action is right if everything happens swiftly
4. Do whatever is necessary
5. Heroism is revealed not by victory but by defeat
6. You will have to lie to others, but never lie to yourself
7. Organized retreat is a form of advance
8. Become evil to do good
9. Then do good to earn merit and undo harm
10. Heroism is completed by inaction

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The last ten years of Hero Kai's life are considered to be a perfect act of Heroism. One rule is exampled by each of his last ten years.

Heroism consists of action

It is Hero Kai's fiftieth year. He is lean and limber, his gray hair pulled back fiercely. People say his eyes are gray with age. Others say his eyes were always as gray as the eyes of a statue, except for the dark holes of his pupils.

His sword is so finely balanced that it can slice through sandstone walls. Kai himself can run up a vertical surface, or suspend his breathing for hours.

Kai starts each day with his exercises. He stands on tiptoe on the furthest leaf of the highest branch of the tallest mango tree in the region. He holds two swords and engages himself in fast and furious swordplay. He walks on his hands for a whole day.

Yet he takes no action.

He goes to funerals to chant for the dead. Rich men hope to earn merit by paying him to recite the traditional verses called the Chbap or Conduct. This is a Chbap.

The happy man is one who knows his limitations
And smiles formally even to a dog
If a neighbor owes him money
He applies an even gentle pressure like water falling over rocks...

...etc., etc. The Chbap are all about being tame and making things easy for superior people.

Kai's kingdom is very badly ruled. The roads have fallen apart; the rivers are choked with weeds; and the King spends his day performing gentle magic for which he has no talent.

The Chbap are the only thing that holds together the Kingdom of Kambu's Sons. The Chbap keep people toiling cheerfully in the rice fields. The verses remind them to give alms to the poor, thus staving off starvation and revolt. They insist that people care for their families, so that everyone can look forward to an honored old age. The Chbap

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prepare poor people to accept placidly an early and often excruciating death.

Kai believes in the Chbap to the extent that they are useful. He knows them in their thousands and recites one or two of them each evening as he is massaged by the boy he bought. The boy's name is Arun, and he gets up early each morning to sweep the monastery floors — and goes to bed late after scattering dust over those same floors to teach him acceptance.

On the day of his fiftieth birthday, Kai's acolytes present him with a handsome gift.

It is something new and dangerously different. In Kai's language, the words for "different" and "wrong" are nearly identical.

The gift is a tiny round bronze ball and if you fill its tank with water and light a fire under it, it starts to spin.

Alone before going to sleep, Kai thinks about this different miracle long and hard. He decides that there is no magic in it. It is as hard and as fair as drought or pestilence.

The Westerners are building whole engines that work like steamballs.

And the Neighbors are buying them.

The state of Kambu is so weak that the King has to pay to keep the neighboring states from invading. Kambu's King is so powerless that his own army is run by advisers from these states, and so helpless that he enforces their corvées of Kambu labor.

Kambu troops are being used to corral or even kidnap the Chbap-reciting farmers, herding them away to work on a new kind of road in the Commonwealth of the Neighbors.

Hero Kai sits on the beautifully swept floor. His little steamball spins itself to a stop. Candlelight fans its way through the gaps in the floorboards and walls. Everything buzzes and creaks with insects. In the flickering light, Kai thinks.

If only the King were strong. If only the Sons of Kambu stood up as one against the Neighbors. If only there were ten of me. Our army is controlled by our enemies. Our wealth pours out to them and when they want more, they just take it. The King's magic makes girls pretty, fields abundant, and rainfall regular. It holds back disease and the ravages of age.

The Neighbors make the magic of war.

Kai finds he cannot sit still. He stands on one leg and hops so lightly

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that the floorboards do not shake. He makes many swift passes with his sword, defeating imaginary opponents.

He loses heart and his sword sinks down toward the floor.

The unquiet spirit spends his strength in cutting air....

Kai takes out an incising pen and cuts a letter to the King in a palm leaf. He fills the grooves with ink-powder and burns it so the ink hardens in the grooves but can be brushed away from the surface.

Then he wakes Arun and gives him the letter. Kai tells him to walk to the lake, and take a boat to the distant, tiny, capital.

What can a mouse do when caught by the cat?

Do not act until necessary

A year later Kai stands with the farmers in revolt.

His monk robes are gathered up over his shoulders to free his arms and legs. The cloth is the color of fire. His body is hard and lean, as if cut from marble, with just the slightest creases of age across the belly and splotches around his ankles.

His sword is as long and lean as himself.

The Commonwealth of Neighbors is hot and smells of salt and drains. The sea hammers a coast that used to belong to the Sons of Kambu. The rich plains get all the rain that the mountains block from Kambu. Everything steams and rots.

Kidnapped fathers sweat in ranks, armed with hoes and pickaxes. Some of them simply carry rocks.

They have been starved and beaten until they are beyond caring. Families, fields, home are all hundreds of miles away.

They have nothing to lose.

The Road of Fire grins like an unending smile. The lips are burnished tracks of metal that gleam in mathematically parallel lines. The teeth are the wooden beams that hold the tracks in place. The Road of Fire looks like evil.

The Army of Neighbors looks beautiful.

They are naked except for white folded loincloths. Their bodies are

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hard but round from food and fighting, and their eyes are gray. Their earlobes are long and stretched, bearing heavy earrings.

Every one of them is a holy man.

The Army of Neighbors is famously small and famously bears no arms. For a moment or two the armies look almost evenly matched.

Then the Neighbors start to chant.

They chant and the sound seems to turn unhappily in place. The air starts to whimper. Kai has time to sniff magic. Magic smells of spit.

The eyes in the head of the man standing next to Kai explode. The man howls and drops the rock he had meant to throw.

There is a ripping sound. Kai turns in time to see the skin being pulled from a young man's body. The air lifts him up and plays with him as he is disrobed of his hide.

A farmer with a lucky mole on his chin is having his intestines pulled rapidly out of his body.

Kai's sword heats up. It becomes as hot as coals. Everywhere about him men scream and drop their hoes or their shovels.

Kai stands his ground. The sword belonged to his master, and his master before that. Kai holds on to it as it scorches his flesh. He focuses his mind on resisting the heat. His skin sears and heals, sears and heals in repeated waves of agony.

The rebels turn and flee.

The dogs of Magic hound them. There is a slathering in the air as magic tastes, selects, destroys.

Magic licks Kai.

All of Kai's skin starts to boil. He can see the fat within bubble. He holds his focus, turns and calmly, somewhat stiffly, walks away. He survives through willpower.

He stumbles down rubble toward cool reeds before having to sit. He steams his way down into damp mud.

In the morning he wakes up after dreams of canoeing on the lake. In a circle all around him plants have burned or shriveled. The dew steams. Kai hears the clink of hammers on rocks and smells a butcher's shop.

He stands. Sons of Kambu work in lines, their heads hanging low. They recite.

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The happy man is one who knows his limitations
And smiles formally even to a dog

Tears pour down Kai's face, stinging the singed flesh with salt. He stands still, building a wall in his mind against despair.

Oh, familiar kindly Chbap, why do you have no answer to this? Do you have no song to bring victory and not defeat?

And somehow one comes to mind. Why this one? It's called the Problem Chbap, the one nobody understands.

Magic is the way of men of power
They do not love kindness and nor does magic.
Magic perfumes the air and sends men to hell.
Push the particles of reality far and fast
And magic will die, succumb to what is likely
In the land where what you put in tea perfumes
And magic is what is ground in the pestle.

Kai stands transfixed. Suddenly it makes sense.

A guard struts forward, howling orders. He is a humble Neighbor without magic. Still contemplating the Problem Chbap, Kai spins on his heel and sends the Neighbor's head still shouting through the air.

Then Kai spins in the opposite direction and starts to march.

What do you put in your tea? Cardamom.

The Cardamom Mountains.

You will know that the action is right if everything happens swiftly

Kai arrives at his old monastery, still smoldering from heat.

The acolytes and the lay preachers and the old masters touch his skin and their fingers hiss. His eyebrows flame and sputter, go out and flame again. The acolytes give him water and it boils in his mouth, but he has to drink it. Tears stream out his eyes and evaporate as steam.

An old master says, "You have become a fulcrum for the universe. I've cast the yarrow and you came up all strong lines, changing to weak ones."

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Kai tells them what happened in the lands of the Commonwealth, and of the Problem Chbap.

An acolyte says. "There are many like that. Remember the Dubious Chbap?"

Even trees mislead,
The worn path bends the wrong way
Undo cries the air, undo says the wise men,
And the trees open up.

Kai realizes. These problem Chbap did not make sense to us because we were not listening. These Chbap bring another kind of wisdom. They provide the balance to others.

These Chbap tell us how to fight.

"And how about this one. The masters love to set this as a test."

The mind observes and makes happen what it wants to see.
This is magic.
The motes of reality coast to what is most likely
And that is called the real.

Steaming, shuddering, fighting the spell, Kai's mind becomes his sword. For once.

His mind now cuts through a different kind of sandstone wall. This is a wall of beautiful, repetitive images: celestial maidens, virtuous monks, and skilled warriors...all that hardened rooster shit.

Kai says, "There is a machine that destroys magic in the Cardamom Mountains. We have to go and find it and use it on the Neighbors."

Immediately, ten young strong warrior monks volunteer. "We pack our bags now."

"No, no, Kai needs to rest," says one old monk, a rival of Kai.

"He should ask the King's permission," says another.

"That old fart!" says one of the warrior monks. "Let him sit at home and make earrings!"

Kai's voice rumbles from the fire within. "We go now. We go slowly, because if I am distracted I will burst into flame."

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The young men exclaim: we take nothing! Just clothes, swords, stout shoes. A blanket against the cold in the mountains. We will hunt our food and cut it down from trees.

"More like you'll steal it from the poor peasants," growls Kai's rival.

"You mean like the King does?" The thrill of rebellion has made the acolytes forget respect.

They bustle their packs together.

The boy who Kai bought creeps forward. "Can I come as well?" Arun asks. His name means Morning Sun.

Losing focus, beginning to crackle from heat, Kai can only shake his head.

"Please." Arun begs. "I am so bored here. I learn nothing. I just sweep."

Eyes closed from concentration, Kai nods yes.

So the acolytes, proud sons of significant people, are joined by the slave. "Boy," they say, "Carry this."

Kai growls. "He works for me. Not you."

The acolytes bow and withdraw. They generally do, when faced with power.

They leave that night in the rain. The raindrops sputter and dance on Kai as if on a skillet.

"Swiftly" in a country without roads or waterways can mean many things.

It means you are welcomed in a village, and feted, and asked to wait so that you can chant at the wedding of the headman's daughter. You abide some weeks in preparation.

Arun says, "Teach me how to focus against the heat, Master. That way I can still massage your shoulders."

To Kai's surprise, he does.

One of the young men falls in love with one of the bride's sisters. It takes another week to persuade him to leave.

"Swiftly" means waiting out the rainy season as the plains of Kambu are milled into dough. It means the toes of the young men rot as they squelch through mud.

It means they wait all afternoon under a covered bridge as raindrops pound on the roof.

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"Swiftly" means being lured into a welcoming village and then held as bandits, accused of theft and berated for rape.

The trial lasts weeks as all the ills of the village are visited on your head. The wretched people really think they can revenge all the wrongs done to them by killing you.

Kai practices forbearance, calmly pointing out that they were not in the village when the wrongs were done. He looks at the headman playing with Kai's own sword. He waits until the headman tires of admiring it and lays it to one side.

Then Kai stands up and says. "I am so sorry. I am afraid there's nothing we can do now except become another great wrong done to your people."

Kai can sing a note that makes his sword throb in harmony. The sword wobbles, weaves, and bounces itself into his hand.

"Many apologies," he says, and slices a pathway through the villagers, leading his acolytes out the door.

The dry season comes and the rivers shrivel. Kai's men march far out to the muddy borders of the lake, looking for a boat. They are told it will return from the city of Three Rivers within the week.

You swiftly wait sitting in mud, slipping in mud, catching frogs for supper. Each day, the lake is farther way, and you must walk again farther out.

Arun says, "Let me oil and clean your sword, Master, so that it does not rust."

The hissing sword does not burn Arun's fingers. Kai thinks: this Arun has talent.

The noble acolytes look at the fish and frogs they have caught. Must they eat the frogs raw?

"No," says Kai, and cradles the frogs in his hands, passing them back crisp and brown.

Finally the boat comes and sets out through winding channels between reeds. It gets mired behind the abandoned hulk of a bigger boat, and starts to settle sideways in ooze.

Kai walks to the abandoned hull, and blesses it chanting, and where he touches it, the wood catches alight. The wreck burns bright as a torch, down to the waterline. The monks wade in the next day, and clear it.

Their boat proceeds to Three Rivers, the graceful capital.

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Their voyage is made even swifter by messengers from Kai's rivals. They rode all night and day to warn the King.

The King's men await them along the marbled waterfront. They greet Kai with distanced politeness and invite him and his men to the Palace. The King himself spares five minutes to greet them. In a silky voice, he insists they must stay and rest.

The acolytes escape the Palace in darkness by running up and over its high walls.

Kai stays behind to rescue Arun who cannot run up vertical surfaces. He loads the boy over his shoulder and walks toward the main gate.

A Neighbor wearing only a loincloth awaits him.

"You dress like that at this time of night?" says Kai. "You must be chilly. Or are you just trolling for trade?"

The Neighbor whispers with disgust and there is a smell of spit.

But once you have been magicked, it is very difficult to magic you again.

Kai says. "Let me warm you."

He embraces the Holy Warrior. He holds the man until his arms have burnt to the bone. A burning fist over his face stifles his screams and will scar his mouth permanently closed. Kai and Arun walk flickering with unfocused flame into the night.

Then Arun throws up.

Most swift of all, are the Cardamom Mountains.

There was once a great trade route east through Cardamom, to the Tax Haven of the Others. But the Neighbors magnanimously protect the Sons of Kambu from the Others (and most particularly from any haven from taxation). They closed the trade route.

Where once there were broad clear pathways through the forest, Kai and his acolytes have to hack their way through vines, undergrowth, and stinging thorns.

After two months of hacking, mosquitoes, bad water, and ill wind, it becomes evident to even the meanest intelligence that something out of the ordinary is going on.

Steep paths snake their way up a hill, only to end up back at the bottom of the valley.

Kai's followers turn a corner and find that the last man in their caravan is now walking ahead of them all.

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Kai cuts his name in the bark of a tree with one long flowing sword-stroke.

They pass that sign again two days later. Kai throws down his sword.

"We stop walking," he says. He sits in meditation thinking about what has happened.

Even trees mislead,
The worn path bends the wrong way
Undo cries the air, undo says the wise men,
And the trees open up.

Kai stands up and shouts "Undo!"

Up and down the valleys, the air echoes "Undo!"

Trees crackle as they unwind, and stand straight. Paths grind as they heave their way back into shape, finally going somewhere.

The air yawns open from relief, being allowed to stretch at last.

Suddenly the path leads to a building, a simple building of red varnished wood. It stands out over the hillside on stilts. Beyond it, on the other side of the valley, rice terraces rise up thousands of feet.

A dog barks. The young nobles advance.

Kai groans. He sinks to the ground and starts to weep. Arun goes to him, takes him by the shoulders and his hands leap back. Arun says, "He's not hot! The spell is broken."

There is a whole village built on stilts over the hillside. There are shaky wooden walkways and windmills. The rice fields go up this side of the valley as well, forming a natural amphitheater. Sounds boom and roll or seem very close to your ear.

The air smells of mud and sweat and smoke.

Kai shudders, then chuckles, and stands up. "There's no magic here."

From out of the houses creep people with terrible broken teeth, spots, and age marks. The younger and more able-bodied of them stand with swords that look like pig iron, cast once and never smelted. Some of the men bear flint scythes that will shatter at the first blow.

"Hello," they say, glumly. "What do you want? We've not got much to take, we can tell you that for free."

Kai smiles with inner peace. "We want to see your machine."

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They grin. They need dental magic urgently.

They lead Kai to a stone wall that shores up the cliff face. The whole village is in imminent danger of collapse.

Far below is a circular valley, where perhaps once a whirlpool wore away the rock. In that cavity, as red as tiles, a huge coiled tube stretches at least two hundred arms' lengths across.

"You're welcome to *try* to loot that," the locals say.

"Please," adds one of them, and they all laugh.

"Turning the thing off would be a start," one of them mutters.

The machine is smooth and huge, like a serpent that has swallowed its tail so that both ends merge. There is a series of bolts closing what look like long sideways windows. From this great height, Kai can see that along the top, one window has been left open and unbolted. What look like stars dance over the opening.

"It's never been properly turned on," says one old man.

"Don't give him any ideas," grunts a younger. He uses the tip of his little finger to pump out gross amounts of pus from his ear.

The air and the distance all whisper like defeat.

Kai slumps to the ground. "We can't move it," he says. "We can't take it to fight the Neighbors."

It is a year to the day since he set out on his quest.

Do whatever is necessary

At the gates of the royal palace, Kai hugs another Neighbor. He burns the man right through the middle.

This time Arun maintains his countenance. "Almost surgical," he says.

Kai's noble followers dance through the gates more silently than settling dust.

Two court officials approach in deep discussion, wearing purple cloth with gold embroidered flowers.

With a whisper, swords slip through them. The cuts are so thin that blood seeps slowly. The bodies are arranged on cushions to look as though they are still in conversation.

Kai and his men whisper into the Sycophancy Salon. The Staircase of Effective Entrances sweeps up to the Royal Chambers.

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Two strong Sons of Kambu guard the top of the steps.

Kai somersaults up the staircase, gathering speed like an avalanching boulder. He rolls to his feet and elbows their swords out of their hands. He holds his own sword close to their throats. He has lost focus and the sword, even its handle, glows cherry red.

"You are Kambu," says Kai. "We don't want to hurt you. We are here to defeat the Neighbors. To do that we must get the King out of their clutches. Are you with us?"

They say yes. All sons of Kambu, they say, want the King safe from influence, and out of Neighborly attention.

The noble warriors surf up the balustrade of the staircase.

Among them is Arun. "I'll take that," he says and relieves one of the Kambu of his fine imperial sword.

A sword must be either inherited from a master or taken in battle. Arun grins and licks the sword's black laminate.

"Now, master," he says. "I look to you for training."

In the royal apartments, the rooms are stuffed with foreigners — Neighborly advisers who run things, observers who write interesting reports, or guest troops who kill the enemy, i.e., the sons of Kambu.

Kai and his ten are like a bladed whirlwind. They spin through the rooms, harvesting heads.

When they are done, five of the Ten stand guard outside the main doors.

Five plus Arun and his master go into the royal chamber.

The King is hunched over a tiny spinning steamball. "Remarkable this, don't you think?" he says, and only then turns around to look at the swordsmen. "But what use is it, I wonder?"

He is a beautiful man, tall, willowy, and graceful, with long thin fingers that look as though they could pluck heartfelt melodies out of the air. His eyes are full of sympathy for their plight. "Have you come to kill me? You will be reborn as toads."

"We've come," says Kai, "to take you home."

The King flutes some kind of mellifluous reply. It is muffled in Kai's ears. He cannot quite hear what the King says, rather as though his majesty was talking with his mouth full.

Then Kai remembers that he is immune to magic. This includes the

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magic of charm, of sweetness, of sympathy — the magic of kindly deception.

Whuh, whuh, whuh, the King seems to say. It is not entirely meaningful to say that Kai squints with his ears, but that is more or less what he does. He can just make out the King saying, "You surely don't want to hurt your King. It's a very humble thing to be a King. Your body mirrors the health of the nation. Hurt me and you hurt yourself."

The young men are drawn. "No of course not, Father. Not hurt you. Help you. Get you away from these Neighbors."

"Ah, but these Neighbors are our friends...." Kai lets the words unfocus back into *blah, blah, blah*.

Everyone is entranced. Kai keeps his eyes on them all as he steps carefully backward. There is a cabinet with crystal doors full of items under purple silk. Kai looks, then strikes. His sword cuts through the bolts.

"Oh dear," says the King. "I've been meaning to change those locks."

Kai gathers up the things. The King's voice is entirely unintelligible to him now. It drones like a call to prayers.

His own men turn around and face him, swords drawn.

Kai has a voice as well. "Nobody will hurt you, Father. Isn't that so, boys? We don't want to hurt the King. But he will have to follow these."

The King's eyes go wide and tearful.

Kai hugs to himself the Sacred Sword, the palm-leaf Royal Chronicles, the cymbals, the earrings, and the cup.

"All of this paraphernalia means you are king. Without it you can't give titles and buy the support of nobles. Without it you can't work your magic. Where these go, you have to follow. Or you are not King."

The King falters, looks sad and lonely, an old man, too frail for travel. What Kai has said is true.

Kai strides out of the room with all the symbols of his power and the King trots after him. Kai can make out his tones of sad complaint. Kai's own men stand their ground. Their swords are still drawn.

"Earplugs," sighs Kai. He snatches up four candles, tosses them into the air, and slices them into eight with his sword. He catches them between his toes, and they light themselves from his heat.

Then Kai spins himself into the air, hugging the royal paraphernalia

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to his chest. Before even his trained acolytes can ward him off, Kai has filled their ears with melted wax.

"Now you can sing as sweetly as you like, King," he smiles.

His acolytes shake their heads, blink in confusion and then shrug.

Kai says, "King, if you call for help, I'll spit down your throat. Your vocal cords will be scalded and you'll never speak again."

Then he and his men jog through rooms soaked in blood and out into the courtyard. All of them run up the walls of the Palace including Arun although he carries a King.

Heroism is revealed not by victory but by defeat

The Neighbors fall for it.

They need the docile Kambu King. He is over-subtle where he should be bold, precise where he should be roughshod but quick.

The horrors of the Palace have shown them that they face a formidable adversary. They abide.

Finally, they hear where the King's new forced capital can be found.

Cardamom.

And so, drawn, they march their magic army into the trap.

Kai stands on the new battlements of what he has renamed the City of Likelihood. Air moves, eagles fly overhead, and far down below at the mouth of the valley, the Army of Neighbors marches.

They number only three thousand. All of them are already through the narrow pass, which looks particularly ragged at the top. The hillside is crowned with heaps of rubble, with logs among them.

Kai smiles.

The Sons of Kambu face the Neighbors in ranks across the valley floor.

This is no ragtag revolt of corvéed labor. These Kambu troops wear armor and carry weapons. The smithies of Likelihood have been busy. The corvéed labor hobbled hundreds of miles to find the new capital, but they have had time to rest and time to train.

Many sons of nobles have come as well, because there is no way for them to get a title but to receive it from the King.

And in flaming orange is a battalion of Kambu warrior monks. They have crossed into Likelihood as well, crying, Undo!

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The King stands beside Kai now. Without his magic, the King looks stooped, wizened, and frail. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

Kai smiles.

Someone must have given the Neighbors the word Undo. That someone hopes to be rescued.

The best argument is action not words. Kai does not answer him.

Down from the battlements to the valley floor are fine threads of silk, invisible to the Neighbors because they are too real.

Kai utters one piercing shriek, like an eagle's call.

On the distant hillsides, over the pass, teams of oxen drag the great logs. The tree trunks turn sideways, which is all that is needed.

The trees will open.

Oxen hauled those stones up the hillside, but love spurred on their masters.

You could say therefore, thinks Kai, that love moves mountains.

The rocks pour down.

Slowly like a lady's hand putting down her fan, the rubble falls the great distance. The Neighbors have time to turn, elbow each other, and clutch their sides. Their thin laughter wafts across the distance.

How stupid, the Neighbors seem to say. These Kambu wanted to rain down rocks on our heads and waited until we were all through!

The beauty of the Machine, thinks Kai, is that it is *not* a presence. It is an absence. There is nothing for the Neighbors or any of their mages to sense.

Then a cry goes up from the Neighbors.

They have cast their first spell and it hasn't worked.

The stones settle with a crash and a raising of dust, closing the pass. The Neighbors cannot get out.

There is no magic here, only swords. The Neighbors are unarmed.

The ten acolytes of Hero Kai leap from the battlement walls onto the single silken threads, and they slide down. They balance holding out two singing swords in each hand, outstretched like wings. They somersault onto the ground.

Then they whirligig their way across the plain, spinning into the soft and real flesh of the Neighbors.

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The monks, the farmers, and the sons without titles advance.

To be sure of victory, the Neighbors sent three thousand of their finest warrior sorcerers.

Within five minutes, all of them are dead.

Again, Kai cries like an eagle and flings his swords over his head. Blood whips from the blades in midair as if the weapons themselves are bleeding.

The Sons of Kambu cheer. They run to Kai, and pat his back. They dip and hold up their hands in prayer toward him. Some of them prostrate themselves on the ground to him, but laughing, he shakes his head, and helps them stand.

"We have all won!" he cries, and all the valley tolls like a giant bell of stone, ringing with many voices.

Kai laughs and turns, and he runs up the silken thread. True he slows somewhat near the summit, but he gains the top of the battlements and the citizens roar all the louder.

He hops down from the wall in front of the King. The King looks like a skeleton.

Kai knows from the man's face. He had thought his only duty was to stay in office. This King liked the Neighbors because they kept him in his palace.

"You are a King for real now," says Kai. "Better start ruling and stop consuming."

The King gives a sad, sick smile. Kai seizes his hand, pulls him to the top of the battlements, and holds the King's hand aloft. All Likelihood cheers its King and all his sacred paraphernalia.

The fiction is maintained.

You will have to lie to others, but never lie to yourself

It has been a year without wonders.

The mountain rice paddies require unending maintenance. Gates have to be opened to let them drain. The gates must be closed promptly or the terraces dry out. Heavy stones must be rolled back into place. Spills of precious topsoil must be scooped back into the fold. The replanting of nursery rice keeps people bent over for a week. The ligaments in the smalls of their backs tear.

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The monsoons are late and small. Water has to be pumped up from the valley floor.

Too many people crowd in and there are disputes. The original villagers had no system of land registration. The newcomers steal their terraces only to have them stolen in turn.

So the King assigns fields. What happens when those assigned fields dry out and there are no more fields to register?

The King is pleased. He looks less of a man than ever, like someone recovering from malaria, but he smiles. "Of course, in the old days, I could have called up rain like that." He snaps his fingers.

Kai's reply is placid. "Now you have the opportunity to be responsible in a new way. You will have to join us in thought."

The King chuckles. "Responsible? The King is not supposed to be responsible. The King just is the king. Unless he is prevented from embodying the health of the country."

"You never did. You embodied the disease."

Kai goes for a walk.

He walks through the court that has gathered around the King. It is thriving, full of superior people in blue cloth with gold flowers. They gather murmuring in distinguished groups, and turn and mutter as Kai passes them.

He is relieved to be free of them. He clambers down the wooden ladder that is the entrance to the royal palace. The palace is one of the original, graceful, dilapidated village buildings. He likes it. What better way to say that here everyone shares the wealth and the labor? He himself plants rice.

Kai loves this new Kingdom. Everywhere he sees the work of God, God who hates miracles because they are so unfair.

He smiles at a beautiful Daughter of Kambu. She grins a strange close-lipped smile that looks neither serene nor spontaneous. She is smiling so that she does not show her rotten teeth.

Kai walks through the market. The Neighbors harass caravans bound for Likelihood. The old trade route is kept open only through continuing force of arms. The noble sons who guard the passes come home wrapped in silk for cremation.

The high mountain steppes are good for only one crop of rice each year. They don't support fruit trees. The stall-owners sell no longan,

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rambutan, or jackfruit. The market stinks of rotten old bananas, and aged mushy pineapples. People cover their faces when they walk through it. Everyone looks very lean and fit.

They still greet each other beautifully, and the sun still shines on this glorious day.

It doesn't rain.

The amphitheater of paddies all around them echoes with the sound of labor — axes chopping stone, men grunting as they pump water, an argument because one man threw all his cleared pebbles into another man's field.

Kai himself has tiny new brown spots all over the back of his hand. "I'm getting old," he tells himself. "It is the natural way."

At the far side of the filthy market is one of the hastily constructed new houses, built from cast-off timber and tumbles of stone. Sons of Kambu are not used to building houses out of stone. They are not used to the winter wind that blows through the chinks.

Inside the house, a man is screaming in pain.

Hero Kai does not need to climb the ladder to see in. He can duck his head into the low shelter.

"Can I help?" he asks. He expects surprised pleasure at being visited by a Hero in the making. He imagines polite bowing and hands held up in prayer. A middle-aged woman whose swollen belly is popping the buttons of her shirt looks at him sullenly.

The old man, quivering, sits up. "No you can't!" he says. "Go away, go away and take my pain with you! May it eat your joints!"

Kai is taken aback. "I am so sorry you are ill."

The man shouts again. "I am not an opportunity for you to earn merit!"

Kai feels the blood in his cheeks prickle.

The man drops back. "Curse you, God, for accepting all my offerings and letting me die! Curse you, God, for creating pain. Go away, God, with all your high thoughts and sharp rocks. Blast every living slug, mosquito, spider, snake, civet, all of the thieving, biting things you created! Die, God! Like me! Die!"

Kai feels deafened by the words. He staggers back.

He turns and sees a ring of people around him. They are all grinning

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smugly. A young man with a particularly nasty smile starts to recite what sounds like a Chbap.

Oh great wise man with all your strength
Too big, you crush us like a mill
Too big, you soak up all our pride
Too strong, you sit on us like an ox.
Too clever, you take away all our comfort
Just because you do not need it.

The circle of people all chuckle. Kai reaches for his sword. He stops himself.

"I will think about what you say," he says. And waits for a respectful response.

"What will you *do*?" asks the smug young man.

Kai acknowledges that with a stiff shake of the head. He feels awkward and foolish as he walks away.

"Die, Big Man! Die!" screams the man in the house.

Kai draws Arun to one side, and takes him for a walk out into the hills where spies can be easily seen.

"It is the way of the world, Arun. You offer people good things, but still they will always complain. To rule, you have to scare them as well as flatter them. We have not used fear. You and the Ten, go out among the town and drink some of these terrible fermentations people brew from the rotten fruit. Pretend to get drunk. Listen to who criticizes."

Kai sighs. "Then we will round them all up and pile stones on top of them."

Organized retreat is a form of advance

Another army pauses at the top of the fallen rubble.

Sunlight glints on metal. They are armored, and some of the armor is Kambu. Banners in the shape of flames flutter in the wind. Gongs and blaring trumpets signal some kind of advance.

The King sits cross-legged on the battlements consulting the Oracle, which of course no longer works here. The yarrow stalks clatter

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meaninglessly onto the paving. "It seems we have visitors," the King says, croaking and wheedling with an old man's voice.

Kai glares into the distance.

People have formed a long line along the rice terraces over the pass. They appear to be prizing free large sections of the cliff face. Huge flat plates of stone break away, land, rock, and settle.

Something like a staircase is being built down from the top of the dam.

This time the Neighbors know magic will not protect them. And they seem to have been joined by Kambu allies.

As he did two years ago, Kai keens like a eagle. It is the call to arms.

There is only silence. A baby wails somewhere.

He keens again and again. Likelihood remains still. Kai hears only wind in response.

The King chuckles and shakes his head.

Kai turns and the King's courtiers block the ladder down. Kai looks at the beautiful superior cloth and imagines it sliced cleanly.

These are not soldiers. Kai puts his hand on the handle of one of his swords, and they flinch and step back. They will not fight him, but they are far from harmless. He walks forward and they step aside to let him through. He beheads them all anyway.

Then he saunters back to the King, hoists him to his feet, and jams a sword to this throat.

"You have the benefit of one escape, because you are my King. But I don't respect you and I have no use for you. Next time, you're dead."

The skinny old man quivers in his grasp bending backward over the edge of the wall.

Kai looks and counts. He sees the Neighbors whose helmets are round with a spike on the top, and he notes the lotus blossom helmets of his own people. He counts them. Superior people outside Likelihood still depend on the King for their titles. They have come to get him, to take him back, to reclaim their superiority.

One thousand he counts. Estimate another thousand there. Three thousand?

There are more Kambu in this army than there are Neighbors.

He darts down the steps and into the Palace.

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He can trust his secret police, most of them. He can trust the Ten. He needs nobody else with him.

Underneath the royal palace, on the slope amid its stilts, there hangs a chute for washing waste down over the hills. Kai called it the Tipping of the Balance, and it is the agreed meeting place in case of disaster.

The Ten are all there, with Arun.

Kai explains why they are not fighting. "We did not set out on this great scheme to become killers of the Sons of Kambu."

He is just a little surprised, just a little disappointed, when there is an urgent murmur of assent from even his most loyal.

"Go pack. Gather anyone you see along the way whom we have marked as Likely. Ask them to come with us, but do not wait. Our aim now is to be long gone by the time the new army gets here."

"But the Machine...."

Kai sighs and marvels at his own powers of acceptance. "The Machine is doomed."

All clatter away except for Arun. Arun says. "My only friend is you. The only person I respect is you. I will be with you until the end." The two men hug.

"Brother," declares Kai. This is a promotion.

They go back to the battlements, stepping over a few heads.

The wave of troops advances. They recite the Loyalty Chbap.

Respect the King, for the job of the King
Is to eat the country.
He eats the country so that it can be processed
Through his sacred alimentary canal.
It comes out rich fertilizer for us to live on.

Kai chuckles. "And the country is shit."

The loyal Ten come back, bringing, perhaps thirty Likely others with them.

"Enough," says Kai. And with measured pace they begin to climb.

From high in the hills, they look down on misty distance. Elephants have lumbered up and over the heap of stone, hauling a battering ram. Great silk-cotton logs slam repeatedly into the side of the Machine.

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Kai can hear the breaking of the clay even from this great distance. A sparkling vapor dazzles its way out of the new mouth. It washes over the elephants and they burn and shrivel. Their great legs twist, collapsing into heaps of ash.

Even on the high mountainside where the Ten stand, the air starts to buzz unpleasantly like a blow to the elbow.

Kai makes one sharp shrill cry. The fat under his skin seethes up and he burns again.

He contorts for a moment, stretching his neck, shoulders and arms. He shivers his way back into normal standing position, mastering himself and the fire.

"Now it's their turn to cheer," he says. He starts to climb again.

Only Arun can lay a comforting hand on his burning flesh.

Become evil to do good

A year later only the Ten are left.

They live in a cave, surviving on what they can hunt. They shiver in furs and spend the long dark hours in meditation. A hard life is what they have come to love, and despite all their virtues, they have become hard men. There are few words and no laughter between them.

Except for Arun. Curiously, he has learned how to laugh. He tells jokes to himself, the Ten, and sometimes even to Kai, when he can find him.

"Master, come back. We need you to warm the walls."

Kai has retreated into the high snows. He perches on icy crags, buffeted by howling winds. The snow sputters on his skin and melts in a perfect circle all around him. The rocks he sits on have the dull metallic look of stones in a steam bath. Trails of vapor hiss from them.

"At least you will be very clean," says Arun again. He crouches near Kai with a pot of stew. Already the stew is icy cold, which is how Kai likes it. It cools his throat as he swallows. Arun feeds him with a spoon he himself has chipped out of stone.

Arun sits in the shelter of Kai's warmth, and places the pot of stew on Kai's lap to heat it up. He tries to make conversation.

"You should come and burn the cave clean for us!" Arun says, but the gale drowns out his words.

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"To tell you the truth, the Ten all think I am still a slave. I do all the work!" Still no response. Being with Kai now can be lonelier than being without him. Arun eats his boiling hot stew.

The gray sky edges toward blue. Arun cannot be caught out on icy trails at night. Arun hugs Kai, though it sears his hides and makes them stink.

Kai looks pained and saddened, staring at something quite definite in all that swirling cloud and snow.

Arun stands up, shouts good-bye, gets no answer, and then turns and walks into the blizzard.

Kai sits alone. The wind drives the snow sideways. The world gets bluer, almost turquoise.

Then, swelling out of the storm and the hillside comes a giant stranger made of air and hardship, rock and salt, wind and sleet.

The Buddha was tempted by Mala, the World. Mala offered the Buddha kingship, and the power to do good in the real world.

"Well," says the World. "Here's a fine place for a Hero to end up. Happy in your work?"

"I know who you are," says Kai through broken teeth that glow like embers.

"I know a good dentist," says Mala. "I made him myself."

The World sits down and sighs in a showy, airy way. "Now what do I have here? Oh, cooling ices. They are made in a city called Baghdad. It's a desert town, quite sophisticated, fiercely hot. They have learned how to transport ice and make sweet delights from it that are colder even that this snow. Magic ices, that would soothe your fiery throat."

Kai chuckles puffing out smoke and ash from his burnt windpipe. "Go to hell," he says.

"That's where I am. Hell is wherever you are, my friend," says Mala. "Freezing and burning for the rest of your life? Sounds familiar to me. Myself, I prefer comfort, the here and now, and if a little bit of Magic gets us what we most desire, I, the World-as-it-actually-is, don't see any reason to forego it."

"It is not the will of God."

Mala sighs. "I have no idea what the will of God is. And, my would-be Hero, neither do you. By the way, you have not achieved Heroism."

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"I know that."

"Think you'll find it in your navel?"

"Better place to look than up your ass."

"My my, we are sharp this morning aren't we? A year of agony tends to do that to people. How about looking for Heroism in reality?"

"I do."

"Haven't found it, have you? Look, I'm the entire world and I have many places to be at once. So I'll say this once only and quickly. Your aim was *not* to destroy Magic. Your aim was to free your kingdom from the Neighbors. I'm sorry to have to make this clear to you, but the only way to do that in the World is to destroy the Neighbors. So why not take the most direct and intelligent route? Destroy them through Magic?"

Kai sits unmoved, eyes closed. "All I have to do is give up enlightenment."

The World's laughter melds with the sound of the storm. "You are so far from achieving enlightenment! You've killed too many people! You'll be lucky to reborn as a frog!"

Mala stands up, shaking his head. "You are a complete and total failure. I'll leave the ice cream here. Don't worry, it won't melt. Not up here."

It a particularly stinging blast of wind and snow, Mala leaves...

...Kai...

...alone.

He finally eats the ice cream.

He stands, and pauses for thought.

"Good?" asks the World.

Kai trots down the hill.

To Arun, he gives the power of wind, to freeze, or dry or scorch. To the Likely Ten he gives in order:

- pestilence,
- sudden rending of flesh,
- blindness and deafness,
- dazed stupidity and cretinism in all its forms,
- sterility and impotence,
- drought and famine,
- age and the death of children,

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- disaster: flood, earthquake, accidents of all kinds
- depression and despair

He himself is already Fire, so he gives himself the power of Kings to make things pretty.

Together with Mala, the Likely Ten descend howling on the Neighbors. Kai stands huge and billowing in flame over the capital city.

Fire torches all their wooden buildings, their finely carved palaces, and the beautiful verse inscribed on palm leaves.

The soldiers of the Neighbors fall where they stand, buboes swelling up and bursting under armpits or in their groins. Others are suddenly split into two. Their fathers go deaf and blind, their faithful wives become so stupid they cannot remember their own names. The young men will find they can't get it up. Their horses and elephants all have rabies, and the vaginas of their women blister with new and fatal contagious diseases. All — *all* — of their children under twelve die; a million children in one night.

Then the sea rises up to swamp their ports and sink their ships. Earthquakes shake their sacred temples into rubble.

Those few Neighbors who are left alive sit down and weep and surrender to dazed despair.

Kai flies on wings of fire and seizes hold of the King of Kambu. "Remember me?" he chuckles brightly.

He seals the body of the King in amber and uses it for his throne. He makes sure that none of the King's sons, cousins, wives, uncles, or nephews are left alive.

"No nonsense this time," Kai declares from his new and sad-eyed throne. "The Commonwealth of the Neighbors is no more. It is a happy part of the Kingdom of the Sons of Kambu. I am their King."

It is Mala, not Arun, who chuckles and pats his shoulder. No hurricanes blew during the conquest.

"We have swallowed you," Kai admits. "You should have considered the possibility when you tried to swallow us. Now, my dear friends and loyal subjects. It is your turn to build a railway."

All the Neighbors are enslaved.

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Then do good to earn merit and undo harm

Women become pretty. The bones in their faces shift subtly and slowly at night. Their teeth straighten. They become pregnant, if they want to be.

Every afternoon, predictably, just before the children go to drive the oxen home, it rains. People finish their wholesome lunches listening to the pleasant sounds of rain on the roof.

The fruits on the market stalls are round, with perfect blushes of ripeness, firm enough but sweet. They scent the air.

Old people suddenly notice that they can stand up straight, and that swinging their legs out of the hammock is easier. They find that standing first thing in the morning no longer hurts. They can dance for joy. They can work in the rice fields as the Chbap advise, and they call to their friends cheerily.

And most strangely of all, whenever they recite the Chbap, good things happen.

Kai chuckles to himself and confides in Arun. "I've given them all magic powers. What was wrong about magic was that it bent the rules unfairly for just a few people. Now, everyone has the power of magic. Everyone has the power to do good. They will realize it, but slowly."

"Whereas," says Arun, his smile a bit thin, "you have a monopoly on doing harm."

"Yes. But I don't have to use it."

"Much," says Arun.

Birds sing, the sun shines, people eat but don't get fat. The Neighbors see that Sons of Kambu have a superior way of life, and envy them. "Well, you know my Grandfather was Kambu," they begin to say, as they stagger under the weight of railway ties. "I always put my superior good fortune down to that."

Kambu words sprinkle their speech. The Neighbors begin to recite the Chbap, and lo! Their backaches cease.

"We have a lot to learn from these Sons of Kambu," they agree.

Their few surviving daughters start to wear Kambu fashion. Their eyes follow noble Sons with alluring brightness.

And then the strangest thing of all comes to pass.

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To earn merit, Kai orders the rebuilding of temples.

The stones are piled back more or less as they were. Kai is a follower of the Dharma, but he honors the gods that underlie that more clear-headed faith, as he sees it.

All the artisans of the Neighbors are now either dead or senile, so good Kambu craftsmen restore the temples to Vishnu, Siva, and even Brahma. The artists love doing this, for underneath the newer religion, the old gods survived in the hearts of the people. Fine new statues of the gods are made and the monks who were the rivals of Kai are given new jobs. They get to enrobe and feed the statues.

The new enlarged kingdom smells of honey.

The old gods come back.

It starts quietly at first. Whispers are heard in cool stone galleries. The shawls and garlands of flowers that drape the statues flutter, with the wind surely, but as if the stone arm supporting them had moved.

Water poured over the linga and the yoni tastes delicious, poised between sweet and savory. The purified water has the power to restore even Neighbor slaves to health. All anyone has to do to receive a blessing is drink and swear loyalty to the Gods and their earthly representative, King Kai the Merciful.

The temple oracles find that their ingenuity is no longer taxed. They no longer have to invent orotund but ambiguous answers to questions. Instead their heads are thrown back and a godlike voice whispers out of them. Sometimes their listeners look overjoyed by the answer, sometimes they are plunged into despair. But they no longer look baffled.

The Sons of Kambu never quite stopped believing in even older religions. For them, everything has a spirit — a house, a tree, or even a stone.

The food left in spirit houses is found suddenly eaten. The flowers in the beds stir and creep forward, conquering more waste ground. Roofs repair themselves and house fronts seem to adopt cheerful smiling faces.

Finally, at least to superior persons and Brahmins, the gods themselves begin to speak.

"More," the gods ask. They have a great way with simplicity in speech. More sweetmeats, more incense, more garlands, more rice. A little gold or a new temple would be appropriate.

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"Well," sniffs Kai, to wealthy dependents. "You heard what the gods told you. Build them a temple."

It is a good way to keep his nobles occupied and leave them no extra cash for private armies.

Suddenly there are hospitals and rest stations for travelers. New roads are built. The King is quick to point out to the gods that roads are necessary if worshippers are to bring offerings.

Roads are also necessary for trade.

A little grudgingly perhaps, the gods do some good. Strong trees, healthy rice, more wildlife to forage, fish in the sea, calm trade routes, and boats that do not leak. Things prosper even more.

"This is a really good deal for you," the gods point out to Kai.

"And for you," he smiles back.

Mala is happiest of all. "I surrender to the superiority of the gods," the World says and keeps himself in the background. The birds sing sweetly.

Heroism is completed by inaction

Late at night, Kai wakes up with Arun's sword at his throat.

A howling gale fills the room and pins Kai to his bed, pushing all his fire down onto the stone mattress.

Arun wants to talk.

He strokes Kai's flaming hair with one hand. "What," he asks Kai, "do you think you're doing? If you swallow the Neighbors, you need to consider the possibility that someone else will turn around and swallow you."

"Arun," says Kai in a tone of voice that embodies the realization that he should have expected this moment to come from him. "Of course I've considered it."

"Of course. But you take no action. You still have a problem taking action, after all these years. But only I know that." Arun lightly plants a kiss on Kai's fiery cheek. He waits for a response. Kai still takes no action.

Arun smiles at him. "Scared old man," he says affectionately. "Who do you think these gods are who are showing up wanting handouts and threatening to turn off the rain if they don't get it? How long do you think they will let you rule?"

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"Until I die. They are gods and can afford to be patient."

"No, they can't. Nothing is more fragile than faith."

"Are you warning me of danger, or asking me to retire? Or just threatening to kill me?"

"All three," says Arun. "These gods of yours get bored. They do terrible things. They send plagues just to keep us in line, and make us pray and give more offerings."

"Sounds like the Ten."

"Oh, we are human. They are not. We can still sympathize. They consume. Poor people always get consumed."

"That is the way of the World," sighs Kai.

"Friend of yours, is he?" Arun asks.

"Yes."

Arun goes still. He strokes Kai's head. "You have been serving everything we are taught to shun. So have I."

"Well, there is no guarantee that what we were taught was true. How long can you lie on top of me with a sword at my throat?"

"Until we both die," says Arun, passion in his eyes.

Kai chuckles. "You are so like me when I was young."

Then he says it again in despair. "You are the closest thing I have to a son."

Arun says the obvious. "Then. Make me King."

Kai considers. "There is no such thing as ex-King who is still alive. I have another proposal. I really like this idea by the way. I make you Regent. You rule here. And I? I go on retreat and I try to recover a little bit of merit before I die. Enough to get me out of hell and perhaps be reborn as an insect or a slug."

"You will declare me your legitimate son, fathered in your youth. Your flesh and blood, your rightful heir. You will give me the title of Crown Prince."

"You're making demands and all you have is a sword."

"No, Father. I have your love. And, you don't want to be stuck in hell or reborn as a slug, and I don't want that for you either. I want to see Kai restored to himself."

They look at each other a moment, pat each other's arms, chuckle and sit up.

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"What will you do as Regent?" Kai asks.

"I'll make us all Buddhists. But I'll let the worship of the old gods continue. I'll starve them slowly. And I'll make sure that dear old Mala is convinced that I will always give him his due."

"Like father, like son."

"Not always," says Arun.

The next day King Kai declares publicly that Arun is his natural son and heir. He makes him Crown Prince, and announces his retirement from the capital. Arun will rule in his stead. Kai passes him the Sacred Sword. There is wild, ecstatic cheering at this delightful development.

There are some hours of light ceremonials, a bit of singing and dancing and drinking holy water. Then Arun mounts the dais. He looks down at the sad-eyed throne and says, "Get this terrible thing out of here and cremate it with honors."

Kai packs what he took with him on that first quest nine years ago. The Likely Ten, now terrible to behold, safely escort Kai to the gates of the royal precinct, just to be sure that he really has gone. With every step he chuckles.

He walks across the fields, toward the lake and across the kingdom. Everywhere people treat him with respect and kindness. This is due in part to a new Chbap that Arun commissioned and paid to have chanters repeat.

Imitate the wisdom of the Great King Kai
Know when to pass responsibility to your son
Depart in good cheer
For that quieter kingdom of the world
Where wisdom is found in small things.

Villagers recognize him, and beg him to stay to chant at weddings. He does so in good cheer. No one accuses him of anything. Women who remember how handsome he once was place garlands of flowers around his neck, and hold up their hands in prayer.

He finally arrives at the place where the paths wind back on themselves, and the trees close over. Undo! he says again.

He finds the City of Likelihood, deserted and forlorn.

He goes to the simple house of unsteady stone in which another old

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man died in pain. Kai unrolls a mat, and finds a forgotten bowl and spoon. Even after all these years with some of the dikes fallen, sparse rice still whispers in the thousand paddies. They climb toward heaven like stairs.

He gathers rice and stores it, some for seed, for there will be only one crop. The many deserted wooden houses will provide him with firewood. He takes the opportunity to prepare for death and accept the world as it is, and finds that there is surprisingly little to contemplate.

He draws in a breath, and goes down into the valley to carry out his plan.

He goes to the Machine. He is able to step through the breakage into its huge hollow coil. He climbs up the scaffolding and flaps the broken reed panels that once powered its engines. Some clay, some reed, some time — that will be all it needs.

The Machine was built in a dead whirlpool because of the centuries of sediment deposited there. Finding clay is easy. So is finding firewood. Kai hauls huge evergreens down from the hills and lets them dry until they are tinder. He touches them and they catch fire, for Magic now rules everywhere, even in Likelihood. He bakes new sections of tube. He weaves the reed into new blades for windmills.

The machine takes shape, the panels turn in the wind, and Kai sighs with satisfaction. He remembers the original inhabitants.

It's never been properly turned on.

Don't give him ideas!

Too late to avoid that, I'm afraid.

Kai once asked, "What would it do?"

"Buzz the world," said one old man.

Kai slides shut portal after portal. The old machine hums. Kai remembers the one bolted portal at the top that was left open.

Kai the warrior monk stands back and then runs up and over the round smooth sides.

Over the last open portal dances something that looks like stars. Kai, the man of magicked fire, reaches through them, pulls the bolt shut, and locks it. He survives the sparkling blast, where elephants could not. All it does is quench his fire like cooling water.

And all the World is deprived of Magic.

Mala descends howling in rage and grief and betrayal, and Kai smiles

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at him. Just after his giant wings drop off, Mala melts harmlessly into the ground, personified no longer.

No more miracles.

In all the temples in the lands of Kambu, the voices of the gods whisper once like dust before being blown away. Then their halls are empty. The statues are wrapped, the oracles speak, but with voices that in their hearts they know are their own.

Kai is released for one last time from the fire in his body. He has changed the whole world forever. He made the world in which we now live. Which can hardly be called heroism completing itself through inaction.

Soon after, he gets sick and dies alone in agony in the tiny house of wood and stone.

And what of heroism?

Well the Rules don't understand it, but they sound good, and at least they don't say that you become a hero by being kind and doing your duty.

Heroism consists of the moment that you are cheered by thousands. Heroism resides in the eyes of other people, and what you can get them to believe.

It can also be secret, without praise, and known to no one except you. That kind is a lot less fun.

Heroism, if you want it, resides nowhere, and everywhere, in the air, whether it buzzes with magic or not. In the hard, merciless world of Likelihood, there is no meaning, except in moments. There are also no Rules.

The old gods had been unstitched into ordinary molecules. The pretty magic of Kings no longer worked. Kai's new railway, roads, and cities were an enticement. Steamboats arrived from the West, bearing cannons and ambitious, likely people.

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F&SF COMPETITION #70

"The 2055 Hugo Awards"

IN THE year 2055, the world will look somewhat different — and so will our genre. Competition #70 had readers look 50 years into the future to find the winners of the Hugo awards.

WINNERS:

FIRST PLACE

Best (Interactive) Fan:

Frodo Baggins (formerly Lucy Doe of New Philadelphia, before surgery)

—Meghan Davis
Philadelphia, PA

SECOND PLACE

Best Extraterrestrial Tell-All:

Earth Girls Really ARE Easy! by Jabunga of Blooon

—Joshua Gunter
Huntsville, TX

RUNNERS-UP

1) Best Edible File:

"The Dream-Cheese of Unknown Kadath" by The HPLOVECRAFT COOKINGNETWORK-2

—Michael Canfield
Seattle, WA

2) Best Novel That Is Neither a Sequel nor the First Volume of a Projected Series and Which Does Not Feature Characters or Situations Licensed from Other Media:

WINNER:

[No works suitable for consideration were published]

—Doug Mayo-Wells
Somerville, MA

3) Best Virtual Book:

Harry Potter and the Social Security Crisis

—Thornton Kimes
San Francisco, CA

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DISHONORABLE MENTION

Best Nonfiction (Unearthed Artifact):

THE DOORS OF HIS FACE, THE LAMPS OF HIS MOUTH: The Newly Found Correspondence between Frank Lloyd Wright and Nicola Tesla

—Harlan Ellison
Los Angeles, CA

F&SF COMPETITION #71

"It was a dark and ion-stormy night...."

This is not the Edward Bulwer-Lytton competition — it's a genre version of it. Complete the sentence, "It was a dark and ion-stormy night," give it an sf theme, and make it as outrageously bad as possible. The winners get nifty prizes; the losers can take comfort in knowing their writing just wasn't execrable enough. Remember to keep your poor prose to 100 words or less, and submit no more than six entries.

Example: It was a dark and ion-stormy night on Planet Rogaine. The cyber-wolves howled and the hyper-trees shook. Princess Diflucan told the guard to rotate the planet a little left of the storm so the cyber-wolves would direct their processes elsewhere. The guard, who loved her, obeyed with a sniffle.

RULES: Send entries to Competition Editor, *F&SF*, 240 West 73rd St. #1201, New York, NY 10023-2794, or e-mail entries to carol@cybrid.net. Be sure to include your contact information. Entries must be received by December 15, 2005. Judges are the editors of *F&SF*, and their decision is final. All entries become the property of *F&SF*.

PRIZES: First prize will receive a signed limited edition copy of *King Rat* by China Miéville (published by Earthling Publications). Second prize will receive advance reading copies of three forthcoming novels. Any runners-up will receive one-year subscriptions to *F&SF*. Results of Competition 71 will appear in the May 2006 issue.

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MISCELLANEOUS

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CURIOSITIES

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Narrator Milton is the only person Nevinson knows who might possibly believe so wild a tale. Credence grows, however, as each of the main characters handles the manuscript and falls under the spell. The only way to free themselves is to find and bury the Dutchman's bones and flute — but the search seems hopeless, even before sinister entities begin to manifest themselves in their dreams:

"And then just suddenly that bony hand clutched my arm and something whispered in my ear. It said 'No farther today.' And then I woke up."

The flawed characters are prone to petty disputes, and all the more believable for that, and for the fact that some of them have read Poe and other fantasists and try to base strategies on lessons learned thus. Mittelholzer (1909-1965), like his characters, was a British Guinese of mixed race; his successful literary career soured, and, like his ghostly Dutchman, he died a suicide. ☙

—Dennis Lien

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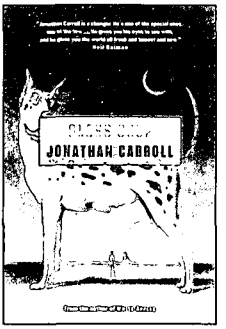

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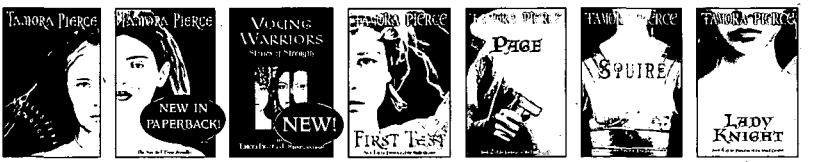

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